EDWARD LEE'S
THE PIG

THE HOUSE
Edward Lee

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book design & typesetting:
David G. Barnett

assistant editors:
Amanda Baird
John Everson
Jeff Funk
C. Dennis Moore

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BOOK ONE:
THE PIG

(I)

Sissy looked at the shot glass full of pig semen and threw it back neat. Without hesitation and in a smooth, single gulp, she swallowed it all, smiled into the camera and licked her lips as though she'd just tasted exemplary cuisine, and then—

"Sissy? What's the... *No!*"

—then blanched and threw up on the floor.

"Fuck, Leonard! This is sick!" she sniped, more falling out of her mouth as she did so. "That stuff tastes like...*uuuuck!"* Then she—

RRRRRRALF!

—threw up again.

Leonard was appalled. Sissy was appalled...

Even the pig was appalled.

«««—»»»

But more than likely one may pause to wonder how—and more critically, *why*—the aforementioned pig semen found its way into the shot glass.

This is the story of that conjecture, and it's true.

It's called *The Pig*.

«««—»»»

It shimmied and mewled, chortled and spat, jerked its rotund body each time one of the girls tried to grab its...well, its dick.

"Owwww!" Snowdrop yelped. "The fucker *bit* me! It bit me on the back!"

It was not a large pig, mind you, not like the 1200-pound Berkshires Leonard had helped his daddy raise back at his Davidsonville, Maryland, farm so many decades ago. Leonard, in fact, had lost his virginity, so to speak, to a Duroc 500-pounder named Lacie. Boys, after all, will be boys. Leonard would always remember that day, as millions would—the same day John Fitzgerald Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas, Texas by, contrary to what most believe, a custom-loaded .221-caliber mercury-tipped round fired not from a Mannlicher rifle but a bolt-operated Remington match pistol. The weapon was fired by a man named Jimmy Sutton who worked for another man named Charles Nicoletti. All that aside, Leonard had been 14 at the time, in 8th grade at Sligo Junior High. "Somebody shot the president!" Leonard exclaimed after rushing home from the bus stop.

But daddy wasn't in the house.

"Daddy?"

Leonard had eventually found him instead back in the first barn, kneed right up behind an ever-cooperative Lacie. It didn't take daddy long to finish his curious business before he hoisted up the overalls and got back to work. "Good girl, that's a good girl. Better pussy on ya than my wife, s'for sure. I

got sick'a stickin' my pole in *that* hole twenty years ago, but—*Christ*, Lacie!" JFK long forgotten, Leonard followed suit, figuring that a boy should emulate his father whenever possible.

So much for male virginity and sexual innocence.

But that was over 20 years ago, and this was the here and the now, the here being one of Vinchetti's safe houses 120 miles out of Trenton, New Jersey; the now being the summer of 1977. It was a nice area—used to be a farm itself by its looks: plush rolling hills as far as you could see, some busted barns which made for appropriate "sets," given the required "theme" of most of Leonard's, uh, "work." See, Leonard made "cinematic productions" for "the Mob," features which necessitated the compliance of a very special kind of "actress."

"Come on, Snowdrop," Leonard insisted, the Canon Scoptic settled on his shoulder. "Try to visualize your presence."

Snowdrop sighed, her sunglasses drooping. A tattoo on her left buttock read: WELL USED. Flaccid breasts dangled as she reached under one more time, and then—

"Owww!"

—the pig bit her on the back again.

«««—»»»

The girls—correction, the "actresses"—didn't generally last long. Most had been drummed out of Vinchetti's revolving prostitution networks along the east coast, and most, if not all, were clinical heroin addicts of

considerable time span: ten years or more. To make a long exposition short, Paul Monstroni Vinchetti, aka Vinchetti "The Eye," was a district boss in what the Justice Department referred to as the Lonna/Stello/Marconi Crime Pyramid, an armature of that mythical human machinery known as the Mafia. Quite a bit more powerful in 1977 than, say, 1997, where its resources dwindled considerably, yes, thanks to "rats" fleeing to the haven of the Federal Witness Protection Program and Identity Reassignment. Back then the so-called Mob easily retained much of its hundred-year-old stranglehold on anti-societal supply side economics. But two decades later would prove a different story as tax-exempt Indian Reservation casinos neutered the Mob's grip on gambling profits, while the Jamaican middlemen had completely shut out Italian types from the lucrative crack trade, along with little helpers such as shadowed CIA units and a certain airport called Mena in a certain state called Arkansas which ferried in dozens of tons of cocaine in a peculiar arrangement with certain Nicaraguans and Mexicans in exchange for hundreds of millions of dollars per year payments in order to even more peculiarly provide military supplements to certain well-known *enemies* of the Mexicans and Nicaraguans, the security of which, for greater than a decade was provided by, in exchange for 10-percent net, a certain governor who would later be elected President of the—

Well, no need for prattling. In essence, and for a number of reasons, the Mob lost its command of most of the money-making schemes that had made it famous. All that remained was book-making, one half of the national heroin trade (the other half being divided with urban Chinese), street prostitution in heroin districts, and— Pornography.

Depending, however, upon one's definition of such. The Mob's biggest blow in *this* franchise came in the early '80s along with the advent of video cassette recorders. In the wink of a jaded eye, gone were grainy "loops" of yesteryear, the 8 millimeter porno stalls, and the anonymous "stars" of such endeavors. The mass-marketing and hence popularization of VCRs obliterated the demand for the grand old loops. Now, when you wanted to viddie some smut, all you need do was jaunt to the neighborhood video-rental establishment and for a scant three bucks take home the new kings and queens of sexual cinematography. No longer called "smut," no longer known as "stag films" or "fuck flicks," a new day had dawned for the notion of having sexual intercourse in front of a camera. It was an industry now—the "Adult Video Industry"—and it had fast infiltrated hometown America to the extent that the Mob's firm hold on mass-market pornography was all but lost. It was all Hollywood now, with stars, trade journals, and even awards!

A snippet did remain, however, akin to a crumb dropped from a very large dinner table, and this crumb was referred to, simply, as "underground."

For the remaining sick fucks who could not be satisfied by the more tame offerings of the "industry," and such ever-recurring names as Marc Wallice, Peter North, Chaisy Lain, and Debby Diamond; and such titles as *Mr. Holland's Penis*, *Backside to the Future*, and *Desperately Humping Susan*, a demand, too, remained. The unmentionables. The stuff that, be it by design or by provisions of Section 18 of the United States Code, could not be found at the local Metro Video Center. "Underground," it should be added,

was the term used, in parlance, by federal law enforcement officials, and this phenomenon is cited by those same officials to represent a couple hundred million dollars per year in gross monies. A good half of this is taken by child pornography—ultimately nefarious and heavily pursued by all forms of law enforcement.

But back then, in '77?

It was a *smorgasbord* of underground, and our friends from Sicily controlled it all! Things that hometown America scarcely even knew existed.

"Scat" flicks.

"Nek" flicks.

"Snuff" flicks.

"Freak" flicks.

"Wet" flicks.

And—

«««—»»»

The German shepherd copulated with the woman in a manner that could only be described as frenetic. *Great, great!* Leonard thought, zooming in the Canon Scoptic 16mm for a from-behind crotchshot. *Rocco'll love this one!* The dog's penis, like a glistening pink bone, fired in and out of Sissy's vaginal ingress. "Cut!" Leonard loudly announced.

Snowdrop, who was *supposed* to be rubbing the dog's testicles from behind, was out for the count. That quarter-gram of skag had zapped her;

she'd be unconscious for a good four hours. The street stuff Rocco and his soldier brought up every week or so was sometimes deceptively potent; sometimes it wiped the girls out for a full day. Not that unconsciousness forestalled action—dogs would copulate with unconscious girls, as would men—but this week's dupe order called for action, and this was to be the last cut before Leonard put it on the editor, it being a neat little ditty entitled *Dog Day Afternoon*, and you can rest assured that the names Al Pacino and Lance Henriksen would *not* appear on the credits.

Sissy winced in borderline withdrawal as Snowdrop fell over unconscious in the foreground.

"Sissy, you're supposed to look like you're enjoying it, not like you're at your grandmother's funeral," Leonard pointed out during the cut. The dog, however, remained oblivious to the director's order, and just kept humping away as Sissy squirmed anxiously beneath. "Goddamn it, Leonard!" the dropout from Crofton, Maryland objected. She was 26 but looked 46, ten years of "slamming" skag wringing her life and looks out like water from a dish rag. When most little girls were playing with Barbies, poor Sissy was forced to grin and bear it while her father sodomized her twice or thrice daily, beat her, burned her, and kept her locked in a disused pantry for the entirety of her formative years. Upon escape, the dark devil of fate had led her to Vinchetti's open arms and the self-medicating bliss of addiction. She'd turned "beat" by 19, rode the "circuit" for the next five or six years, and now here she was—all 100 pounds and collapsed veins. The end of the line.

"Push him off!" Leonard shouted. "Don't let him—"

But, lo, too late. The shepherd's copulation slowed, then ceased. The dog wandered off, sated now, snuffling at the floor and leaving its human sexual cohort with a vaginal canal full of dog sperm.

Leonard turned off the camera.

"Come on, Sissy." Leonard wiped sweat from his brow, frustration and floodlamps baking him. He couldn't help but make the warning: "Rocco'll be here tomorrow night. We need one more wet shot for this movie, and I've *still* got all the processing and editing to do!"

"Fuck wet shots and fuck Rocco and fuck *you!*" she yelled back, but it was a most peculiar image. She lay perfectly prone and motionless on the floor as she made this protestation, dog semen leaking from her sex. She looked like a corpse yelling. "I need to fire up, Leonard! I'm stringing out! I-I...I wish I was dead!"

You will be if this movie isn't ready for Rocco.

"The heroin's all gone, Sissy. You and Snowdrop used it all. From now on we'll have to ration it. We can't have this. You know how Rocco gets when he's mad." She turned her head, a plea in her eye. "Leonard, I'll do anything for you if you...if you...kill Rocco."

Leonard about wailed. "No talk like that!" Leonard was lucky to be alive himself, considering his marker, which via their oral contract would be paid off in another month or so. It was rumored that Leonard's predecessor had tried to book. Rocco found him in a White Castle in New York City, then brought him back to this safe house and did "the job" on him. Part of "the job" involved cutting the man's face and Fed-Exing it to his mother in San Bernardino. The rest involved... Well, more on that later.

"Don't even think things like that, Sissy! Take what you can get! Jesus Christ, you girls are *impossible!*"

Then Leonard stalked out to the pen—

"Here, boy, here—"

—to get another dog.

«««—»»»

He called the feature *The Confessor,* a meld of Bergman and Polanski, with bits of Hitchcock and Fulci tossed in for spice. The unnamed "Writer," broken in spirit and in love, is transported to an otherworldly vale where he meets...the countenance of truth...

It was originally a short story Leonard had had published in a college literary journal.

THE CONFESSOR

by Leonard D'arava

The thurible sways. The confessor, dressed in black, looks down from the smoking plinth.

The writer stands in ashes.

"Why are you here?" comes the voice, but it is no human voice at all. It sputters like rushing water, like dead leaves in the wind. The voice is incalculable.

"Absolve me," the writer replies. *Stand tall,* he thinks. *Be brave and you will prevail.* "Forgive me in my state of disgrace."

The pause howls. Then: "But I am not your confessor."

These words, black as the confessor's raiments, make the writer feel barely extant. What is manhood—no, *spirit*hood—but courage and faith? He's here for more than absolution. He's come for truth. He's come all this way, to this terrible vale, to ask: *What is truth? What is truth really?* But now that he's been granted his moment of petition, his resolve flees. His courage and his faith flee, too. At once, he feels worthless before the immobile figure in black.

"So you've come to ask a question," it bids.

The vale's graven dark oozes gossamer mists as if through pores. The writer thinks of sepulchers and uteri, of palls and wedding gowns and newborn pudenda and autopsy saws and grave-dirt; he thinks of the fornication of opposites.

He's not quite certain what the vale is. An interstice, perhaps. A rive or a threshold. Whatever it is, it's far and away from the world. He senses higher orders beyond: orders which bar the admittance of any imperfection, but not heaven. Heaven is a different place. The writer thinks of life and death, yet he knows he is not dead. Maybe he's just still learning.

Or perhaps this is the end. Perhaps he's learned all he'll *ever* learn.

"I see too much," he confesses. "I feel too much."

"You blame your loss on *sensitivities?*"

It's as though the notion is absurd. "I..." the writer attempts, and nothing else. It's not forgiveness for his sins that he craves—that's another realm. He craves to be absolved of all he's misconstrued, and of his failure to calculate truth, *real truth* and what it adds up to. He feels like a seer who's seen all the wrong things.

"Tell me what you've seen," the confessor says.

The behest dilates in his mind, a black flower. What has he seen, though, that could be so deluding? Sadness? Dissolution?

"Despair," he finally answers. "Too many lives and too many hearts pushed past the point of collapse."

"Ah, despair." The confessor raises a finger. "And what of your own life? Your own heart?"

"I don't know. Regret, I guess."

"But you've been given so *much*."

"I know! Forgive me!"

The vale shimmers in its fulgent mist. The confessor says, "But I am not your confessor."

The darkness, too, is incalculable. It's midnight now, wherever this place really is. It is the moment of reckoning's totality, the holy hour of the Druids. The full moon's bright light cuts the writer's features down to the starkness of bone, and the fragrant smoke which eddies off the thurible reminds him of the scent of her hair.

"You deserve nothing," the confessor asserts, "because you've lost...*everything*. Are you listening to me?"

Yeah, I'm listening. This fact, this aphorism, crushes the writer. That's how he feels. Crushed. *I am a crushed man,* he muses. It's almost funny.

"Be brave, though, seer, and you will prevail."

Will I? he wonders. But it must be so. The writer's love was gone, taken away or lost—it didn't matter which—by the decrees which ruled and ruined the world. Sometimes he espies the world of nothing but a demesne of rain and failure. Yes, he's lost his love; that's what had bidden this ultimate question. He felt desperate to pursue the truth out of his own doubt of it.

"I've lost my love," he finally admits.

"Yes," the confessor says. "You have."

The thurible sways closer, its arcane blue embers for the first time revealing glimpses of its bearer's face. The writer shudders. It's a terrible visage. A mouth like a knife-cut in meat, and chiseled slits for eyes. *My God,* the writer thinks. The blue glimpses steal everything left in him at once. If he'd ever had any courage, any courage at all, it was gone now. If he'd ever had any faith...

Gone. All of it, gone.

The confessor points down with a finger of black stone. Derision looms in the unearthly voice. "Look now, *seer.* Into *yourself.*"

My God, he panics. *What is truth? What is truth really?*

Her words reach back to him like corpse hands reaching back from death. That's the saddest part of all. Her words are ghosts. Her words are tiny specters.

—i'm proud of you—

—can i have a kiss?—

—i would do anything for you—

—me, too—

—you do, huh? well i love *you* more—

Next: visions. Memories pouring into light.

She's so beautiful beneath him, he's astonished. It rifles through his eyes into his head: her raw, naked, indefectible *beauty.* Even her sweat is beautiful, the sweat on her breasts and legs, on her angel's face, the beads of sweat nestled like jewels in the lovely little plot of fur. She's shining, *glowing*, in this avatistic beauty, wet in flesh and real blood, real love. Perhaps the only moment of genuine truth in his life collides with him now in the vivid image, like hammer to piton. Even if it's only a shred of a moment, it's still perfect. Her voice is a tiny plea impoverished out of the desperation to communicate that which reduces words to total inferiority and sails away beyond anything even remotely conveyable through primitive human utterance. Her plea is this: "I love you."

The writer falls to his knees, in ashes.

"Seen enough, seer?"

"I've buried my own faith myself," the writer croaks. "All my courage, virtue, insight, all my truth. Forgive me."

"I am not your confessor," the confessor repeats. "You can only forgive yourself."

The writer's fingers worm through the ashes. The ashes are warm. He lowers his face and kisses the pallid puffs, thinking of his love and how brightly it let him see the world.

"You can stay here forever if you like. But where is the truth in that?"

The writer's eyes widen; it was a good question. His loss has made his face a wet, ashen mask, and on high, atop the plinth, the confessor slowly leans back and begins to laugh. The laughter blurts outward like a gaggle of black birds.

So this was the essence of self-knowledge? To be *laughed at?* He expected unimpeachable sagacities, not mockery and humiliation. He expected blessings.

He expected an answer to his ultimate question and now was being crushed for even daring to presume to ask.

"It is your own pretension that crushes you," the confessor remarks.

"I know," the writer says.

"It is your conceit and all you take for granted. You've let selfishness and self-pity make you blind."

"DON'T YOU THINK I FUCKING KNOW THAT, YOU STONE-FACE OBSIDIAN MOTHERFUCKER!" the writer bolts up and suddenly screams, spittle flying off his lips. "DON'T YOU THINK I *KNOW?"*

But the confessor's voice turns clement, sinking to the softest suboctave. "You've created loss out of gain—a golem made of clay

with your own hands. The maker destroyed by what he makes."

What is truth? the writer thinks again, disgusted. *What is truth really?* The thoughts bleed across the scape of his mind. Was it really selfishness and self-pity? He would do anything for her. Anything. He would cut parts off himself for her.

The vale's silence descends...like death. It's an atrocious contrast against the fullness of the writer's revelation: the verity of his love, and all the vision that his love gave him, vision in the broadest and most inscrutable sense. The contrast makes him want to throw up right there at the confessor's black-marble feet. Yes, contrast. All the world's love against all of its loss. He sees beautiful flowers tossed into pits of excrement. He sees maggot-filled bodies and stray rot washed up onto beaches of pristine, white sand, and the stretched brown bodies of the starving, dead children found raped in culverts, and the Belsen SS catching babies on bayonets.

"Is that all there is?" the writer sobs.

"What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think, goddamn it!"

"Then look behind it all. If you're perceptive enough, if you're *smart*, you might see something. Tell me what you see."

"I..." The writer shuts his eyes, fails again.

"Do you see angels or devils?"

"Angels," the writer moans.

"Yes, and they smiled on you once. Try something new."

"What?"

"Smile back."

Her name explodes from the writer's throat. The vale quakes with her name and what it really means. The shout nearly tears his lungs out of his chest.

After a silence, the confessor asks: "What have you just done?"

"I don't know what you mean," the writer wearies, still on his knees in the ashes.

"Of course you don't, because you're stupid and weak like everyone else. So I'll tell you. Do you want me to tell you?"

"Yes!"

"You just answered the very question you came here to ask."

Suddenly the writer feels seized, paralyzed.

"You can go back now," the confessor says.

"What?"

"You are absolved."

Only now does the writer dare to look up. The confessor is walking away, leaving trails of mist. All that's left to meet the writer's gaze now is the radiant white light of the moon.

That was the story. Not bad for a 19-year-old college kid. He'd been majoring in Literature at St. John's—the art college in Annapolis, when he'd written it, and the story actually went on to win some minor literary awards and was later included in a fat Penguin anthology entitled *The Best New American Writers of 1970*. Regrettably, Leonard's MSAC grant ran out the year before and he'd had to leave the St. John's campus. But over the next

few years, the story stuck in his mind and began to transform into something else, just as his creative interests were transforming. Like "the writer" in the piece, Leonard began to *see*. He was a *seer.* He began to see *The Confessor* as a quasi-literary film. He studied the film greats of the era and their masterpieces. He studied film, also, on a technical basis. Suddenly Leonard had a goal in his life.

"I'm going to make a film," he told himself one morning.

Lots of people made independent films, and the really good ones launched the creator's career. Leonard knew he had what it took to make a film of unparalleled symbolic importance.

He had what it took, all right, except one thing.

Money.

One step at a time, though. First, he procured a job—as janitor—with Maryland Public Broadcasting, Channel 22. This was a tax-funded PBS enterprise, located on Hawkins Road in Davidsonville, Maryland, directly across, in fact, from a famous nudist colony called Pinetree. (If one ever wants to visit the nudist colony, just drive down Maryland State Route 450 and look for the blinking, 780-foot TV tower. You can't miss it.) Anyway, while cleaning studio floors and taking out garbage for $1.55 an hour, Leonard watched the studio's technicians with a focused eye, learning their tricks, and in his off hours even worked with said technicians. He learned how to develop film, using the station's fleet of automatic processors. He learned how to run the cameras (*good* cameras: Canon Scoptic Series, Chinon sound models, and Beaulieus!), the track lights, and the big professional grade Sankyo film editor.

Then, one night, he *stole* the cameras, the track lights, and the big Sankyo film editor. He was promptly arrested by the Anne Arundel County Police—their city substation was located less than one-mile from Channel 22—and was even more promptly convicted of breaking and entering and theft of state property. He received an 18-month sentence in the County Detention Center on Jennifer Road.

It was musing of his future film that got him through it. Leonard, being a slim young white man with no street smarts was very positively received on D Block of the center. He was raped with absolute gusto by fellow inmates with names like "Cadillac," "Shooter," and "Tyrome." On his first night of occupancy, in fact, Leonard met his cellmate, a terrifying African-American man with shining skin, zero body fat, biceps akin to apples, and an afro like the black guy on *Ironside*. This man's name was George. "Hi, I'm Leonard," Leonard introduced himself, offering to shake. The gesture was not returned. Instead, George replied to Leonard's greeting with these words: "Ah'll beat myseff off wiff my hand affa I woke yo' ass." George kept his word, most every night, and often traded the use of Leonard's anus to other members of the general prison population in return for cigarettes. "You *myyyyyyy* bitch," George reminded Leonard on such occasions. "You give yo' boy-pussy an' yo' mouff ta who I say or I'll'se *bust* you up." Leonard believed him and soon became the cellblock bitch. His rectal sphincter acclimated rather quickly, and just as quickly Leonard learned to perform fellatio with a commendable degree of proficiency. "Swallows my nut, bitch, *alls* of it!" Leonard didn't think about the act, nor of the taste which followed often in dizzying volume. Instead, while sucking virtually any

penis put before his face, Leonard reflected upon his movie. He storyboarded every frame in his mind, calculated every scene, every camera angle, every lighting effect. Before he knew it, the deed was done. And the same too for rectal coitus. The casual disregard for the act of non-consensual sodomy truly astounded him at first. Upon Leonard's very first shower while "in stir," he scarcely had time to lather up before an elephantine penis had found its way fully into his colon. "What—what are you doing!" Leonard wailed. "I'se heppin' myseff!" his query was answered from behind. And hep themseffs they did, to their heart's—and groin's—desire. Leonard did not by any means enjoy being sodomized, nor did he enjoying sucking rank penises and swallowing bitter convict sperm. But he was perceptive enough to realize that compliance was the only way to increase the chances of leaving this stone motel on both feet. So he did his time twice, in a sense. He grinned and bore it. All the while plotting each frame of his movie to the most diminutive detail.

After nine months, Leonard was paroled on good behavior. The film was all he cared about now, his only goal. And he reckoned that in his experiences as an incarceree, he had paid for his sins doubly. "Please, God," he prayed one night. "Don't let me get caught again..."

And God did indeed answer Leonard's prayer, for on that very same night he stole a red Chevy Chevette from the front of a house in Edgewater whose owner had left the keys in it, and he went right back to Channel 22, whereupon he restole the cameras, the lights, and the big Sankyo film editor. He stole some $1700 from the petty cash box and eight 400-foot magazines of Kodak Ektachrome 16mm film, a couple boxes of quartz

replacement bulbs for the ARRILITE and Dedolight floods, and a bunch more stuff.

And this time he got away with it. Leonard could scarcely have been sitting prettier, save for one thing.

He had the equipment now, but he still lacked a production budget. So he figured he'd procure this the old fashion way—he'd earn it. He figured maybe $2000 for set rentals, and another $2000 for design, props, effects, etc. He landed a job—for a hefty $2.50 an hour—at a classy Gambrills restaurant called The Widow's Walk at the corner of 301 and 450. Dishwashing. Lots of overtime, and a free meal from a cool chef named Freddy every shift, and even a free room upstairs with the other dishwashers who were all illegal immigrants from red China. *I'll have that four thousand in no time*, Leonard figured.

This was what it was all about, wasn't it? Working hard to get what you wanted. Getting out there in the work force and *doing it*.

"Leonard!" came the fierce whisper. "Let's *do it!"*

This mysterious bid came to him late one night, not a week after he'd begun the job. A Friday night, well past 2 a.m. Leonard finished the last of the "pot pans," as they were called: alloy metal plates on which seafood entrees were broiled, and a motherfucker to get clean. It was nearing time to turn in but he still had to empty the drain can beneath the salad bar which collected the water from the ice that had melted. Upon doing so, in the dark, paneled warrens of the sedate restaurant, a sleek hand latched onto Leonard's arm. The hand was hot, urgent, moist. It startled him...

"Leonard! Let's *do it!"* she whispered. "She" proved to be the restaurant's hostess, a stunningly attractive woman in her late 20s named...well, let's not use real names here since this is a true story. Let's just call her "She." Short, honey-blond hair perfectly straight, and perfectly straight bangs. Huge, luminous eyes, ocean-blue. And a body like the new girl on *Charlie's Angels*. An aura of desire seemed to radiate off her, along with something else that smelled like it might be derivative of some alcoholic beverage. "I've been hot for you since the day you walked in here!" her whisper complimented. Of course, Leonard had heard that she was hot for any male human being in the place but that hardly mattered, right? Leonard's sexual experience in life was, at this point, limited solely to a few Duroc pigs as a youngster back on his father's farm, and the forced rectal plumbings he'd been treated to at the County Detention Center. But *this?*

This was the real thing...

In a moment, that lovely hot little hand on his arm became the lovely hot little hand on his groin. "Mmmmm," she remarked. "I can tell you like me." Leonard liked her, all right, as the response of his sexual amines affirmed. He came in his pants after just a few crotchrubs. But...she was so nice! "Don't worry, I'll get'cha ready again in a minute." She dropped her cute little hostess top, bearing perfect apple-dumpling breasts, and then her tongue was snaking down his throat. Her hips ground against his as she wedged him between herself and the salad bar counter, moaning into his mouth. Next, she was sucking his tongue with the same dexterity that Leonard had previously sucked a multitude of penises on D Block. The sensation was exotic, and his blood seemed to turn to hot mist all at once.

She pulled up her cute little hostess skirt and dragged his hand between her thighs. "Feel my pussy, Leonard!" her whisper pleaded. Leonard felt her pussy, with adoration and awe. A small pelt of soft down and a tender, slick opening that seemed to pulsate around his investigating finger. "I need you *in me* now!" she revealed as her own hand found its way back to Leonard's stifled groin. The zipper came down and the hand went in, expertly parting the already wet Fruit of the Looms. Leonard was erect again instantaneously. "Ooooo, ooooo," she turmoiled. "Fuck me right here on the salad bar!" She sat up on the stainless steel counter, hoisting up her dress, and urgently helped Leonard pull up his dishwasher's apron and get his size 29W 31L Levis down to his ankles. "Aw fuck, aw shit," her breath profanely gusted when Leonard, for the first time in his life, engaged in the act of sexual intercourse with a human female. He could smell the dank, peppery fetor of his previous ejaculation, and evidently so could she... "God, your cum smells so good!" she pointed out, eyes closed, head back, and legs wrapped around Leonard's hips. He fornicated with strained slowness, each glide of his erection into her vagina bringing sensations like rampant electric current from his feet to his genitals. It was as though his penis were a plug and her sex...a light socket. *Don't come, don't come yet!* he screamed at himself. To stave off the inevitable, he thought about proverbial things: Mantle's 500th homer, Paul Casanova of the Washington Senators, the Redskins recent ass-kicking of the Rams, putting Roman Gabriel in his place, the asshole. *Oh how I hate John Brodie!* Leonard reflected. *And Staubach!* If ever there were evil incarnate on earth it was Roger Staubach for being the best goddamn quarterback in the biz and

summarily walking over the Skins at will. Meanwhile, during these reflections, P—, er, "She" was coming like a freight train on the salad bar, her feisty vagina spasming around Leonard's penis like an apoplectic sheath, each breath a sucking shriek into her lungs. No one had heard of g-spots back then, but Leonard found it nevertheless and gave it a good thrumming. By now her chest shined like shellack, and her nipples stuck out like rose-colored thumb-ends. At each climax, her eyes rolled back in her head to show only the white (sort of like the girl in *The Exorcist* which Leonard had seen with his friends at the Hampton Mall twin theater) and she was even drooling in her rapture. "God, you can fuck, Leonard! It feels so good to have some good cock in me. Shit, my husband never fucks me... He's queer..." This information surprised Leonard, for her husband was a squat, rock-faced unfriendly motherfucker named... Well, let's not use real names here, since this is a true story. Let's just say that her husband was "The Boss." He owned the place. And as to the revelation that The Boss was homosexual, Leonard grew confused. If The Boss preferred sexual congress with *men*, why marry this beautiful, sexually charged lightningbolt of a *woman?* But the answer came almost psychically, when between respiratory gusts and orgasmic spasms, she said, "The cocksucking old fuck only married me so his business partners wouldn't think he was a fruit," and immediately after this intriguing bit of information, her ankles locked yet again around Leonard's clenched buttocks and she squeezed off another drenching, groaning, gusting, eye-rolling orgasm. "Come in me now!" she pleaded. "Fill my pussy up with your cum!" It was a most dire request, and it was Leonard's full intention to fulfill it. Goodbye to the mental images of

Mantle's 500th homer. 'Bye to Brodie and Staubach. Here were the goods, ready to *launch* from Leonard's seminal vesicles and into the deep delights of—

GONG!

It felt like a sledgehammer that impacted the top of Leonard's head just two strokes short of dumping the wares of his loins. Paralyzed, he collapsed to the floor, his inane erection still throbbing but his head throbbing too and near the brink of concussion. "Honey!" her voice could be heard from above. "He came onto me! He-he-he...was *raping* me!" A much more gruff voice responded, "Shut up, ya slut. Fuckin' the help again, Jesus Christ..." Then came a sharp SLAP! no doubt the introduction of an open palm to our hostess' face. "Get outa here before I really get mad." Sobbing, then, and the patter of feet. Eventually, Leonard's vision cleared and, still flat on his back on the floor in front of the salad bar, he looked up and saw the face of The Boss glaring down at him. "Fuckin' my wife, huh?" A shoed foot stomped down on Leonard's stomach. Leonard gagged. "Bet she told ya I was queer, huh?" Leonard's response needed to be decrypted from the paralyzing wheeze, but it sounded something like this: "Nuh nuh nuh..." Then The Boss flipped Leonard over on his belly, and Leonard found he still could not move even a single fiber of muscle. (It was not a sledgehammer that he'd been struck with, by the way. It was a pot pan.) "Sure she did, and ya know something, punk? She's right." A fat hand grabbed a bottle of Progresso extra-virgin olive oil from the salad bar caddy, then squirted it liberally into the cleft of Leonard's buttocks. It was no real surprise what happened then. "Gonna park my car right in your garage," came a rather colloquial promise.

The Boss buggered Leonard right there on the salad bar floor, admitting a "car" into Leonard's "garage" that felt not particularly long but admirably wide. A Land Rover perhaps, or a Gremlin. Leonard was squashed flat, a helping hand wrenched into his hair, grating his face into the carpet. "Here's a shit-baby for ya, punk," The Boss then remarked and ejaculated with zeal into Leonard's rectal vault. The soiled penis was then wiped off on Leonard's dishwashers' apron, then he was dragged into the kitchen and out the back door and next thrown into the dumpster.

"Ever come back here again," promised J—, er, The Boss, "and I'll cut your head off and fuck your neck."

The restaurant's back door slammed as *Leonard's* back door effused a slick mixture of extra-virgin olive oil and semen.

Gee, he thought amongst the garbage. *I guess that means I'm fired.*

«««—»»»

A frisky collie named Fred finished the all-critical job. Snowdrop unfortunately remained close to comatose in the b.g. but that was all right. Sissy, on the other hand, managed to reanimate herself sufficiently enough to reassume the task of having intercourse with a dog.

Using all of her female intuition—or whatever the throes of clinical heroin addiction had left to her—she even managed to sense the animal's impending moment of crisis, pushing away most precisely and, thank the fates, most effectively. Fred the collie then successfully dribbled its

ejaculant onto Sissy's blanched belly, providing the absolutely necessary "wet shot" for Leonard's camera.

"Great, great!" he shouted. "Sissy, you did it!"

Not caring to share in the celebration, Sissy threw up a few belts of low-grade bile and passed out. Fred, meanwhile, snuffled away, his business finished, and it was then that Leonard gleefully shut down the baking lights. Finally, and at last, he had the entirety of *Dog Day Afternoon* "in the can."

It was 2 a.m. now. The editing job would take maybe twelve hours, and with any luck, Rocco wouldn't be early. Leonard rushed to the darkroom and put the last film roll in the Kodak processor, cognizant of the grim, pre-industrial strains of Fripp & Eno's *Evening Star* from the radio. Then he went to the fridge for a quick bite, forgetting that it had been empty for two days. "Oh, man," he complained to the open Frigidaire. As empty as empty could be. If you looked up the word "empty" in the dictionary, there'd be a picture of this fucking refrigerator. Leonard's gut ached; he hadn't eaten in two days now. Rocco never seemed to bring enough in the way of necessities, be they food or heroin, and Leonard knew that if he didn't get some grub into the old breadbasket, he'd be passed out on the floor along with Sissy and Snowdrop. Then *Dog Day* would not be ready tomorrow, and that was a consequence he did not care to reckon.

"Oh, man," he said to the panty shelf. The shelf was not empty; in fact, it was loaded up...with dog food.

All *kinds* of dog food—Leonard had four dogs to feed. *Not even a good brand,* he thought. Giant brand. Couldn't Rocco at least have been thoughtful enough to pick up Alpo or Mighty Dog? Well, he'd eaten it

before on such deprived instances, he'd eat it again. *Let's see.* He scanned the rows of cans. *Beef & Cheese Flavor, Hearty Chicken Dinner, Big Chunk Beef, Beef & Liver.* He chose the latter, hoping the liver might let him think he was dining on *foi gras.* The label sported a collie much like Fred, dashing happily through a field of grass; the *back* of the label, however, wasn't promising. INGREDIENTS: WATER (SUFFICIENT FOR PROCESSING), CHICKEN STOCK, CHICKEN FAT, CHICKEN PARTS, RED #4, RED #8, SODIUM NITRITE, SODIUM NITRATE, SODIUM PHOSPHATE, BHT, BHA, ARTIFICIAL BEEF AND LIVER FLAVORING.

"Where's the beef?" Leonard almost wailed. Even dog food was a rip-off. *Ain't life grand?* He manually opened the can, plopped its contents on a plate, and began to eat.

It did not taste much like *foi gras.*

«««—»»»

Later, his belly full, he went to urinate. A ring of black fungus marked the waterline in the toilet. Bits of dried vomit flecked about the bowl—heroin addicts threw up *a lot.* As he voided his bladder, an impulse, then, urged him to feel his scrotum and testicle.

Not testi*cles.* Testi*cle.* Singular.

Hence, the happenstance which led Leonard to become deprived of one.

After his termination of employment at The Widow's Walk, Leonard decided that Annapolis was not the berg that would make his dreams come

true. He still had the rickety Chevette and one night on a lark, he shimmied it onto Interstate 95 and kept on trucking till he got to New York City. Annapolis wasn't a film town, but The Big Apple was. They shot all the good shows there: *Kojak, Mod Squad, The Man From U.N.C.L.E.,* and Woody Allen made all his movies there. First, he secured his gear in a U-STORE-IT rental facility off of 25th street, and he ditched the car. He found an ideal place to live for cheap rent at what the classifieds referred to as "an artist's retreat" called the Works, and—presto!—he was set.

He still had most of the petty cash he'd ripped off from Channel 22—that would cover rent and food for a while, but he still needed his production budget.

Quite by chance, he met a man one day on Amsterdam Avenue. The man was sporty, sharply dressed in a suit and tie, thinning hair and something in his eye that might be described as "shifty." Leonard would pay this man no mind initially; instead he loped dejected down the street, still caught in his desperate muse. "Just four thousand," Leonard was talking to himself in frustration. "Four thousand and I'm set!" Then, of course, he could make his movie—*The Confessor*—send it to the Sundance Film Festival in Park City Utah, then the cinematic world would see his genius and he'd be rich, copping big Hollywood contracts just like George Lucas had after making *Electronic Labyrinth* and Coppola after *Dementia 13.* But it seemed the tribulations of Job just kept landing on his head.

Or...had they?

"Hey, kid. Four thou's what you need? Is that what you said?"

Leonard stopped, turned, and looked at the well-dressed if not shifty looking man who'd spake the strange words.

"I need it to make a movie," Leonard said without much use. "I've got the script, I've got the equipment. All I need is the money."

"I can spot ya four thou easy," the man zipped off. "You gotta show me the equipment, though, for collateral purposes. Then I lay four large on ya, cash, but it's a hundred points."

"A hundred...*points?"* Leonard asked, not quite comprehending.

"Interest kid. I lay four on ya, cash, and ya pay back eight."

Leonard's eyes bloomed. Sure, that was a steep interest rate, but where else would he get a loan? It wouldn't take more than a few weeks to make the movie, and not much more for the money to roll in. He'd clear the debt easy, even be able to pay it back early!

"You got a deal, sir!" Leonard enthused. Then he happily led the man to the U-STORE IT! The collateral was proven, and the deal was sealed. Then the man, right then and there, gave Leonard four thousand dollars in cash.

The man's name was Rocco.

«««—»»»

Naivete. The oblivion of youth.

Rocco, as you may have guessed, was, among other things, a loan shark for the Mob. Leonard supposed he knew that but saw no good reason to consciously acknowledge it. None of that mattered. Only the movie mattered, for the movie was his dream. Leonard knew he'd been put on

earth to make movies. And he shot the movie—the rough cut—in three days. You see, luck continued to pour forth from the sky like rain in Seattle. Not only had he gotten his loan as quickly as if he'd summoned a genie from a lamp, some sympathetic tenants at the Works attended the City College's drama classes, and they eagerly had helped him out—for title credits, no money—and—more, more luck!—it just so happened that the City College Drama Department was in the middle of an adaptation of Macbeth. When the Tawes Building closed for the night, Leonard snuck in with his pals and, utilizing the impressively crafted "witches' scene" set, along with a terrific dry-ice fog generator, he was able to put the whole thing in the can in three nights. The costume department provided the Confessor's black raiments, while the Confessor himself was played by one of Leonard's new-found neighbors. As for the role of the truth-seeking writer...Leonard played the part himself while yet another buddy ran the camera. This seemed to add even more verity to the heart of the creation.

Three days and—*boom!*—it was done. In a manic spurt, he then edited the movie and processed the sound in another 48 hours. The postmark deadline for the Sundance Festival was just another day away, yet Leonard managed to mail the final cut of *The Confessor* in just a nick of time. Ten months from now he'd be rich, and he had a year to pay back the loan, and better yet, the total production costs—thanks to the "borrowing" of the set from the college—came in at a scant $700. This enabled him to maintain rent at his cheap room at the Works and not worry about a job. Instead, he began his followup script so he'd have the next one ready for Hollywood when *The Confessor* won Sundance and then went on to Cannes.

It was a *wonderful* dream.

Then came a knock on the door. Just a few days later.

"Hi, Rocco!" Leonard greeted his friend. "I shot the movie already! It's going to be better than *The Tenant!*"

"Great, kid," Rocco cordially remarked. But behind him stood a man who had to be bigger than Bill Brundige. Bill Brundige was a defensive end for the Redskins, and he was, like, six-foot-five, 270, which meant that the guy behind Rocco was even bigger, and that was *big*. Big jaw, big nose, big arms, big everything. And the same shifty, beady kind of eyes that Rocco had.

"Kid, this is Knuckles. I bring him along as muscle on pickups. Knuckles, meet Leonard."

When Leonard shook hands with this suited giant, something in his stomach seemed to drop. *Why are they here?*

"Glad to hear about your movie, kid," Rocco commented, "but we gotta a bunch more pickups today. So let's have the dough."

"The. Dough." Another drop—PLOP!—in Leonard's belly.

"You got the dough, right kid? Please tell me you got my eight large."

"I. Uh. Eight large."

"Yeah. Let's have it."

He was joking, of course! Right?

These guy's didn't look like they were joking. "Wellawellawella," Leonard attempted.

"I gave ya four on a hundred points. Ya owe me eight. Like we agreed."

"Wellawella-uh-uh...that was an interest rate based on a year, right?" Leonard said. "You know, like the banks?"

Rocco and Knuckles busted out laughter.

"Do I look like Suburban Trust? Kid, don't fuck with me. It's a *week*. Everyone knows that. Points tabulated on a *weekly* basis."

Only now did the mammoth Knuckles speak. "He ain't got it, Roc."

Rocco's leer spiked Leonard in the face. "Well, do ya, kid?"

"Nuh-nuh-nuh, no," Leonard blabbered.

Silence, then.

"This is why we call my pal here Knuckles. Knuckles, show him."

WHAP!

Suddenly, Knuckle's ham-hock-sized hand was queerly covered by a black glove that had protruding knuckles. These were knuckle saps, or sand mitts, not that Leonard particularly cared what the implements were referred to as. He went down like the clichéd ton of bricks once the knuckle saps were introduced to the side of his head. Half-conscious, half-paralyzed, much like when J—, er, The Boss at The Widow's Walk had gonged Leonard's cranium with the pot pan while Leonard was two pelvic thrusts short of ejaculating into The Boss' wife. Only this seemed a bit more severe.

These men weren't pissed off restaurant owners.

They were loan sharks. Gangsters.

And it was then that these gangsters crouched down. Words floated like big wobbly bubbles in a fish tank. "Tough luck, kid. Ain't got time to fuck around with small-timers. We gotta kill ya..."

Leonard, then, mercifully passed out.

«««—»»»

More words wobbled amid the fuzzy, stygian scape of what Leonard presumed was heaven, hell, or some manner of afterlife. It was not Rocco nor Knuckles who'd spoken the words (it was a man named Leon Askin, in case you're interested). The words recounted in a high, squeaky German accent, and the words were this:

"Klink. Shut up."

But when Leonard awoke in a moment or two, he wasn't dead. "Why didn't I think of that? Shit, Knucks, you gotta sliver of brain." Rocco was commenting and hanging up the phone. "Yeah," Knuckles said. "I gotta good idea every now and then."

"Now all I see is a colonel about to became *corporal!"*

Leonard's eyes opened, roved, looked at them. The TV was on, and Knuckles was watching *Hogan's Heroes.* "Klink, I'll have you court martialed, shot, *and* sent to the Russian Front!"

"Hey, kid," Rocco said upon noticing Leonard's return to consciousness. "You lucked out."

"Yuh-yuh-yuh—yes, General Berkhalter!"

"I'm...not dead," Leonard mouthed.

Rocco snickered. "Kid, you were one dick-hair short of checking out but just before Knuckles was gonna crack your neck, he got an idea. So I called Vinch."

"Vinch," Leonard mouthed.

"Yeah, Vinchetti, as in Vinchetti ‘The Eye.' He's district boss at headquarters in Jersey. Me and Knuckles are on his crew. And Vinch *loved* Knuckles' idea. See, kid, we had this joker up at one of our joints shooting flicks but he, like, fucked up real bad so Knuckles and I had to do the job on him. That's why we ain't killed ya."

Leonard stared through a headache like lasers drilling his brain. He didn't know what Rocco was talking about.

"See, kid. Instead of killin' ya, you're gonna work for us for a while. Vinch says do a good job for a year and the dough you owe'll be paid off."

Only now did some semblance of sentience return to Leonard. "You're...offering me a *job?*"

"That's right, kid." Rocco inspected his fingernails. "You're gonna work for us doing what you do best. Making movies."

Leonard's head craned up off the floor. "Movies?" It sounded absurd but then Leonard wasn't going to complain or ask any burdensome questions. He was alive.

Rocco's lip twisted, and a brow arched. "That's the good news. The bad news is Vinch wants a nut."

A nut. Leonard reflected. A hazelnut? Planter's?

"You know, to keep ya in line. Punishment for going bad on your marker," Rocco said.

A nut.

"A...*nut?*"

Then he knew when Knuckles pulled down Leonard's pants and snapped open the angel-blade.

"Don't sweat it, kid. We're only taking one. Why do ya think God gave ya two?"

Rocco and Knuckles busted out laughter.

And Leonard screamed—

"I see *nothing, nothing!"* Sergeant Schultz assured.

«««—»»»

Leonard groped the single testicle a moment more, as if to verify that it was an aspect of reality. Then he zipped up his fly, flushed the toilet, and finished the final edit of *Dog Day Afternoon.*

«««—»»»

More exposition. The night that Leonard had been divorced from his left testicle, Rocco and Knuckles loaded up the car with Leonard's film-making gear and then, with somewhat more difficulty, loaded a shock-eyed, puff-faced Leonard into the same car. The car was a '69 Cadillac Deville, gray. Nice leather seats. "Knuckles, give the kid a rag so he don't bleed on the leather."

Later, Leonard would discover that it was not a terribly savage job that Knuckles the Bill-Brundige-sized gangster had done on half of his reproductive potential. The giant, peninsula-jawed man had expertly slit the scrotum, popped out the raw ball and—*snick!*—severed the vesicular cord. One, two, three—done. Surgically precise for, after all, Knuckles had had a

lot of experience cutting things. He had cut off arms, legs, heads, faces—you name it, Knuckles had cut it.

And it might be added that Knuckles had then placed Leonard's ball in a Dow "gripperzipper" ZipLoc plastic bag, presumably to submit as proof to this Vinchetti person that the assigned task had been properly completed.

(Later, for what it's worth, Leonard's ball would be thrown into the palatial back yard of Mr. Vinchetti's estate where a guard dog would swallow it whole.)

Leonard lay in the back seat, clutching his groin. *They're taking me someplace...to make movies?* Very shortly he would find out what kind of movies, and why, and it is not necessary to expend wordage on the self-explanatory. Instead he contemplated his predicament in stopped degrees. He'd lost a testicle because he owed the Mob money. The Mob should have killed him but they didn't. Instead they were taking him to some arcane location to make movies. He was still alive and therefore still technically able to fulfill his dream of seeing *The Confessor* win Best New Picture at the Sundance Film Festival lock, stock, and barrel.

Things, he supposed. could've been worse.

"Um, excuse me, Mr. Rocco, but, um—"

"Lemme guess, kid," Rocco drolled back. "Your bag hurts."

Rocco and Knuckles busted out laughter.

"I—I mean, I'm grateful to you for not killing me, and I'll gladly do whatever you want me to do in order to make recompense for my debt—"

Rocco slapped Knuckles on the arm. "Ya hear that, Knuck? The kid's got smarts. Recompense. I like it."

"But, uh," Leonard droned on from the back seat's black murk. "Did you say that I would be making *movies* for you?"

"Yeah, kid. Now pipe down. I gotta nod."

For the next five hours then, Leonard lay in the smothering, leather-scented dark of the Deville's back seat. It was dreamy. Charles Mingus and blue-note jazz drifted, barely audibly, from the radio, and Leonard kind of floated back there above the Cadillac's quality suspension. He dozed off intermittently, dreaming of sweet nothings. But sometime later the long car's shock absorbers began to squeak, and Leonard was jostled slightly awake.

He could hear the rough and steady popping noise of the car's tires rolling up a winding gravel road. He could see the moon through the back window, the moon and the stars and the heavens above. It reminded him of a poem he'd read once: *In the moon, in the stars, in the heavens above, even the angels are burning up with all my love...*

Then he wondered, *What does heaven hold for me?*

The car stopped and he heard a sound. It was a sound that would symbolize a paramount aspect of his life over the coming year.

The sound of a dog barking.

«««—»»»

"Mostly dog flicks," Rocco informed when they entered the run-down little house on the hill. "That's what you'll be shooting. There's a pen out

back we keep the mutts in. Plenty of dog food in the pantry. Make sure you feed 'em at least twice a day, or they'll try to eat the girls."

Leonard followed them in, carrying as much of his gear as he could hold in his arms. The pain at his groin meshed with the sheer confusion of his soul bushwhacked him; he didn't really even comprehend what Rocco was saying. What they'd walked into was a dirty kitchen fitted with a lot of old appliances. An unpleasant, meaty odor hung in the air. "Christ, this fuckin' place stinks worse than the meat-packing district," Rocco complained, a wince in his eyes.

"It's the whores," Knuckles elucidated in moron monotone. "They don't wash."

"We oughta deep-six'm both in the Hudson, but it'd probably kill the fish."

Rocco and Knuckles busted out laughter.

"In here, kid."

Leonard, still oblivious and heavy laden with his equipment, dumbly followed Rocco into a room off the kitchen. A light clicked on. "Is your shit better than this guy's?" Rocco asked.

Leonard looked around. Clutter and film cans filled the cramped cubby. Strips of film lay on the floor. It was a make-shift cutting room, he could tell. A work bench housed a splicing tape dispenser, and a rinky-dinky RealView hand-crank editor with a 4-and-a-half-inch screen. Next to it lay a Bell & Howell Super 8. "Oh, yes," Leonard finally managed to respond with some pride. "This is all eight millimeter. I shoot in sixteen. Better grain, better resolution."

"Good, kid. Darkroom's there. Some big fancy machine we hadda buy. Hope you know how to use it."

Another door. Leonard entered to discover familiar chemical scents and a newer model Kodak ES Series film developer with a selectable feed-bridge that would accommodate film sizes from eight millimeter to thirty-five. "I can run all of this easily," Leonard said. "I was taking 300-level photography courses in college."

"Good, kid. Now, see those cans?" Rocco pointed to shelves full of plastic and metal film cans, fifty to two hundred and fifty foot spools. "Watch some of them so you know exactly what kinda flicks you'll be making. The last guy was an asshole but he was pretty good so we need you to shoot good stuff. If you *don't* shoot good stuff, you go in the Hudson."

It was hard to take all of this information in considering the circumstances: ripped from his home in the middle of the night, ripped from his life and his aspirations, not to mention his left testicle ripped from his groin.

Rocco grinned. "It's nothing personal, kid, but that's life. We got orders and we ain't got time to fuck around. You fuck up out here, we get rid of you. You do us right, we do you right. Right?"

Leonard nodded.

From the corner of his eye, quite by chance, he noticed an opened cupboard. A sliver of a bolt shot through his heart momentarily—*faces* seemed to be staring at him from the cupboard, and they seemed...*very recognizable*. One step closer and he looked in. Jack Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Abraham Lincoln all stared back. So did Barry Goldwater, George

Wallace, Lyndon Johnson, and Mr. Spock. *All* the great presidents. They were *masks,* Leonard eventually realized, rubber Halloween masks that you pull over your head. *Why,* Leonard wondered, *are there rubber president masks in the cupboard?* He would find out later, because before he could make this question vocal—From another room came a *thunking* sound.

"That's Knuckles, rousting the girls. Come on and meet 'em—if they ain't dead."

Leonard shuffle-footed behind Rocco to some facsimile of a living room, though "living," in this instance, was a gross abuse of the term. Rotten carpet, a rotten couch. Rotten wallpaper on rotten walls. A crooked picture hung above the couch: a hillside scene. Quaint.

A thin, naked girl lay either asleep or unconscious or dead on the floor. Skin the color of starch, and dirty, stringy blond hair. Another girl in a stained dress lay similarly on the couch. In their emaciation, they could've been twins, save that the girl on the couch had dirty, stringy *brunette* hair. Knuckles was thumping his size 13 foot against the floor right next to the blonde's head. The girl didn't move.

"Shit, are these bitches dead?" Rocco asked.

Knuckles kicked the girl in the head. Delayed reaction. In a moment she made sort of a whimper, then she stirred.

Rocco pressed the bottom of his shoe against the face of the girl on the couch. He jostled her around some, then she too began to come awake.

"Get up, ya stinky bitches!" Rocco yelled. "You were supposed to clean this joint up, and your dirty cunts too! This place smells worse than an ass-crack!"

Now Rocco placed his shoe on the brunette's neck, pressed down. She gagged a little, began to flinch a little. "Can ya believe it? No respect at all from these bitches. Knuckles, give this one a pop."

"Right, boss."

Knuckles walked over, leaned down, rolled up his gargantuan fist, and socked the girl right in the stomach. She retched and her eyes shot open. When Rocco took his shoe off her adam's apple, she curled up into a ball. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she murmured. "We didn't know you were here."

"What am I, an asshole?" Rocco railed at her. "When we walk in, you jump. Now you tell your junkie friend there on the floor if she doesn't wake her ass up right now, Knuckles is gonna cut her nose off."

As frantically as possible from a semi-comatose heroin addict, the brunette prodded the naked blonde on the floor with her foot. "Snowdrop! Snowdrop, get up! They're here!"

Eventually the blonde dragged herself up off the floor, puff-eyed, and sat on the couch. Then Rocco made the introductions. "Kid, the stinky blond one is Snowdrop, the stinky brown-haired one is Sissy. They're busted junkie street whores from Vinchetti's east coast circuit. When they burn out, we bring 'em here. They're so skinny and ugly, a john won't pay more than five bucks for a trick. So we use 'em for the flicks."

But Leonard was just staring at all this, wondering if it was a dream. Dreams didn't *smell* this bad, of course, but the whole thing seemed so absurd he couldn't believe it.

"Girls," Rocco went on, "This here's Leonard. He's replacing that asshole fuckface we had up here before, and he'll be shooting the flicks from now

on. You do what he says. *Everything* he says. If you don't, we'll fuck you up. Got it?"

Both girls sat meekly on the couch, their hands in their laps. They both nodded.

"Good. And if this place stinks this bad next time I walk in here, I'll kill ya both. Clean this shithole up and wash your dirty asses."

Both girls nodded. But then Sissy, the one in the dress, peeped, "We need —we need some bad, Mr. Rocco."

"Oh, you need some bad, huh? You know the score, you take care of me and Knuckles first, then you get your shit." Rocco and Knuckles summarily lowered their trousers, and Rocco shot a glance over his shoulder to Leonard. "Kid, get the rest of the shit out of the car, the food, the drop cloths, and the rest of your shit. Me and Knuckles are gonna grab ourselves a quick nut."

Leonard dumbly nodded and went back outside. His state of shock seemed to walk in front of him like an ex-friend. He still didn't really know what the hell was going on. He only knew that he was here, and he was here to fulfill some ineffable purpose.

Back outside, the warm night air felt plush. Crickets chirruped, oblivious to the macabre house, its macabre occupants, and Leonard's new employers. He got into the Caddy and popped the trunk button inside the glove compartment. It was too bad that he was still too stunned to think in any mode of relative coherence. Otherwise he would've noticed 1) a loaded snubnosed Colt Detective Special in the glove box, and 2) the keys in the ignition.

Too bad.

Two bags of groceries sat in the trunk next to a bag marked McINTIRE'S HARDWARE, THANK YOU FOR YOUR BUSINESS! that had some packaged plastic drop cloths in it. *Drop cloths?* he thought. *They want me to paint?*

No, they didn't want him to paint.

He took the bags into the kitchen. Both grocery bags were filled with fifteen-ounce cans of Giant brand spaghetti and meatballs. That was it.

"Knuckles, are you nuts?" he heard from the living room.

"Uh...huh?"

Leonard wandered back, looked into the living room.

Knuckles, with his gangster slacks down, knelt behind the naked blonde—Snowdrop—who was on her hands and knees. Rocco, his pants down too, stood with his groin in Sissy's face, who remained seated on the couch. She was fellating him.

"These bitches got bad news pussies on 'em," Rocco was telling Knuckles. "Every clap in the book up that snatch, and now they got this new one everybody's talkin' about. Hercules, I think they call it. *No cure* for it, Knucks. Ain't you heard about hercules?"

"Uh... No, Roc."

"Yeah, new shit, they say it came from the hippies in the '60s, all that free-love fuckin' they did. It's nasty shit. Like you wake up the next day and you got a sore the size of a meatball on your dick. And it *never* goes away. Man, you don't want *that* shit."

"Nuh-no, Roc, I sure don't want to catch any of that hercules."

Hercules? Leonard thought. He remembered some Greek Myth classes, and a cartoon when he was a kid, but...

"Ten to one, Knucks," Rocco warned. "These junkie bitches got pussies chock *full* of hercules. Stick it in her ass instead."

"Uh... Yeah."

Knuckles did as was suggested. His penis appeared oddly small for a man of his size—maybe five inches erected. He popped it into Snowdrop's flaccid anus without so much as a quiver from her. His hips thrust back and forth a few times, then he kind of shimmied, paused, and stopped. "Ooo," he remarked. "Yeah." Then he withdrew his penis, sort of wiped it off on her buttock, and pulled his pants back up.

"Good nut, Knuckles?" Rocco asked.

"Uh, yeah. Put one right in her shit."

Rocco chuckled. "Christ, Knucks. These junkies don't eat. Ain't *got* no shit up their tails, either of 'em." Then he looked down and frowned. He withdrew his wet penis from Sissy's mouth. It hung half hard—long and thin, like a snake. "Ya stupid bitch, ya suck dick so bad I lost my woody." Then, quite suddenly, he—

whack!

—smacked her so hard on the side of the face he left a pink handprint on her cheek. Then—

smack!

—punched her in the eye, and then—

crack!

—drove the heel of his palm into her mouth. *"Mmmmmmmm!"* Sissy moaned, bringing her hands to her face. She began to sidle over on the couch, blood running down her chin. Next, Rocco grabbed her by the hair with both hands—

"*Eeeeeeeeeeeeee!*" she whined.

—and slammed her down on the floor. "Yeah, there it is," he remarked, seeming pacified. A full erection stuck out now. "Don't know why, ya know?" he said casually to Leonard. "Only way I can keep a good stiffer is to rough 'em up a little."

Sissy, bloody-mouthed, crawled forward, and resumed her fellatio. "Yeah, that's better, that's a good bitch," Rocco said. "Yeah, yeah—" He went up on his tiptoes... "Here comes lunch... *Ahhhh..."*

He pulled out, then leaned forward and pinched Sissy's cheeks together into a fish face. "Eat that nut, go on, eat it."

Sissy's throat clicked as she gulped.

"Good little junkie. Can't think of a better place for my spunk to be than in your skinny junkie gut." Rocco raised his trousers and from a pocket withdrew two small glassine bags of white powder. "One for you—" he threw one down to Sissy, "—and one for you—" and the other to Snowdrop.

Their dead eyes lit up as they fumbled for the diminutive packets. Then they literally crawled out of the room, down a dark hall, where they disappeared.

Rocco slapped Leonard on the back. "Usually we fuck around with 'em a lot more—more fun that way—and sometimes we'll have ya film it for a comp."

Leonard still was having trouble digesting all of this. *Comp?* "Uh, you mean a compilation?"

"Yeah, that's right. Keep your second camera loaded up for it, just odds and ends to splice together later. You'll see what I mean when you watch the stuff that other asshole made." Then he slapped a big bag of more tiny bags of white powder into Leonard's hands. "Hide this, and don't let 'em sweet talk ya. It'll last till next time we're up. Only give 'em two bags each a day. Don't forget, or they'll die. And make 'em eat half a can of spaghetti a day too. They won't want to so you gotta make 'em. Do it in the middle of the day so they don't puke it up. We don't really give a shit if they die 'cos we can pinch more off the circuit anytime we want. It's just that it's a hassle sometimes 'cos during the week me and Knuckles are picking up markers from New York to Raleigh. Keep 'em alive as long as you can. Got it?"

"Um, yes," Leonard said.

"What we need from ya this week is a twenty-minute master. Straight dog stuff, and we need at least four wet shots. Yeah, I know it's hard to get a dog to come on a girl—just keep doing it till you get it. And when I say a master I mean a flick that's ready to dupe. It's gotta be edited, titled, the whole nine yards." Rocco cut a grin, pinched Leonard's cheek. "I like ya, kid. So don't fuck up."

"Uh, right," Leonard said.

He followed Rocco and Leonard back out to the car. Rocco stuck a Lucky in his mouth and went on, "It's different week to week. It all depends pretty much on the demand for what we got warehoused. Kiddie stuff's way too

hot—we got guys in Washington who do that—so you'll never have to do any kiddie stuff. Just animals mostly."

Just animals, Leonard thought.

"We gotta stable out back next to the dog pen, but there ain't nothing in it right now. We make 'em as we need 'em. Vinch wants a goat flick, we bring up a goat. Vinch wants a donkey flick, we bring up a fuckin' donkey, like that. Vinch wants a horse flick...we bring up Knuckles' mother."

Knuckles pouted. "Oh, real funny, Roc."

Rocco hee-hawwed like a donkey. "And sometimes, kid, we do specials..."

"Specials?" Leonard couldn't help but query.

"Yeah. Scats, neks, wets, shit like that. Shit, I'm sorry, kid. You probably don't know what any of that is, huh?"

"Well, no."

"Just watch the shit in the cutting room, you'll see. Anyway, we gotta blow."

Leonard raised a curious brow. "You, uh, you mean...you're leaving?"

"That's right, kid." Rocco looked him dead in the eye. "I hope you're not stupid enough to be thinkin' what I think you're thinkin'. You might be thinkin' ‘Hey, these goombas are driving away. What's to keep me from high-tailing it out of here?' Is that what you're thinkin'?"

"Well, uh—"

Rocco nodded, put an arm around Leonard's shoulder. "Here's why you *shouldn't* be thinkin' that, kid. This place is the sticks, and I mean Sticks City. There ain't *nothin'* out here, no stores, no towns, no buses—nothin'.

You're over twenty miles away from the closest road off the county emergency route. Nobody even drives past this place 'cos there ain't nothing to drive to, so you can forget about hitchin' a ride. A couple miles over the hill, yeah, there's a town but it's one of these fuckin' Amish towns or Quakers or some shit. About a hundred of 'em and they never leave. They got no phones, no cops—shit, kid, these flakes don't even have cars. They ride around in horse and buggies like a bunch of little assholes dressed up like pilgrims, and they live in this compound you can't even get into. They won't even talk to ya. So let's just say that you *do* decide to hoof it 20 motherfuckin' miles to the main road. You won't get nowhere. You leave, we'll find you. You could bury yourself in the woods and we'd find you. You could put on some of that scoober stuff like that French guy on TV Jock Gusto and you could swim to the bottom of the fuckin' sea, and we'd find you. That last asshole, the guy before you? He got all the way back to New York. And you know what happened?"

"You, uh, found him?" Leonard guessed.

"That's right, kid, we found him. And we did a job on him Rocco Style. In the cutting room there's a can marked *Asshole.* Watch it tonight, first thing. And any time you even *think* about splitting, you watch it. Got it, kid?"

"Uh, yes, Mr. Rocco."

"Good. Awright. We're out of here. Oh, and sorry about your ball, kid, but—hey—that's the way it is. It ain't our fault the world's so fucked up, right, Knucks?"

"Right," Knuckles studiously replied and got into the Cadillac. The big V-8 gunned up. Then Rocco got in the passenger side and put down the power

window. "Later, kid. We'll be back next Friday with the horse."

Leonard stood and watched them drive away.

He stood there for a very long time.

«‹—›»

When he went back into the house and sometime, perhaps hours, later, he found the aforementioned plastic film can, labeled *Asshole.* He loaded it up on the RealView hand-crank and watched.

He didn't have to watch long to get the gist.

On screen, a long-haired man lay lashed naked to something like a workbench in a room with stained walls and...drop cloths on the floor. Blood gushed from his mouth as another man wearing a rain poncho and a ...Lyndon Johnson mask was silently smacking a hammer into the long-haired man's—Asshole, from here on—mouth. Asshole flinched and quaked. Lyndon came around to the f.g., now brandishing a knitting needle, which he quite abruptly jammed into Asshole's penis via the ingress of the urethra. His hips bucked and bucked as the knitting needle was jammed down and down until it was gone save for the shiny cap on the end. Sewing needles then were placed almost daintily one by one into Asshole's clenched testicles. One after another, until the gonads more resembled some kind of sci-fi porcupine. Next another, much bigger man in a poncho entered the frame. He was wearing the rubber Spock mask. A fileting knife was produced, and then Spock began, with much technical dexterity, to slough

strips of skin off Asshole's chest, abdomen, and legs. Shortly thereafter, Asshole died, but not before Spock had just as dextrously cut off his face.

Leonard snapped off the editor's lamp.

He just stared for a while.

He felt numb.

He felt unreal.

He needed to get out again, out into fresh air. Not to escape, mind you—after witnessing Asshole's cinematic demise, Leonard heeded Rocco's warning well. He wandered the yard in moonlight, strayed past the small empty stable and then the dog pens. Within the latter, several skinny, mange-flecked dogs—a collie, a mongrel, and a German Shepherd—raised their heads from sleep and looked at him, their tongues hanging out. Leonard looked back in complete incomprehension. *Here are my stars*, he realized in a slow jolt. *I want to make movies, and here is my cast*... Moments later, the dogs lowered their heads and went back to sleep, unimpressed by the new director of the production house.

Then a hand touched his shoulder and a stonelike voice cracked, "Sinner, repent ye of your sins. For we, the vassals of God, know what it is you are doing here."

«««—»»»

The time it took Leonard to shriek and piss his pants seemed like a full five minutes when actually it only consumed perhaps a few seconds. He

spun around, eyes locked open and his heart hammering, to face a broad-shouldered figure standing in the dark.

"Huh—who are you!" Leonard wheezed.

The figure stepped forward into moonlight. '50s or '60s, it seemed, and a stern, work-weathered face with narrowed eyes full of contempt. The man's voice had sounded solid yet eloquent, like an evangelical fire-and-brimstone preacher, and his attire presented a parity. *It's one of the Quakers*, Leonard realized, or whatever they were. Rocco had mentioned a secluded township just over the hill. And the man looked the part: slacks and jacket made of what seemed black sack sloth, a starched white shirt and painfully stiff collar, a black string for a bow-tie, and black hand-cobbled shoes. He even wore an austere black brim hat, and looked just like Ernest Borgnine in Wes Craven's *Deadly Blessing*, not that Leonard himself could make such a simile, for that particular film would not be made for several years. Nor could he possibly know that the film would star a wan young blonde named Sharon Stone, and provide the only *decent* role in her forthcoming megastar career, but that was beside the point.

"Yuh-you're one of the Quakers from down the hill," Leonard jabbered when his heart rate went back down.

"Lord on high!" the man cracked back. "We are not any foolhearty Quakers! We are the Epiphanites!"

"Uh, sorry," Leonard apologized.

"And I am the Rector Solomon come to warn ye to keep thy distance from our little circle of God, sinner!"

Even Leonard had to raise some objection now. "Excuse me? You don't even *know* me, so how can you judge me a sinner?"

"Blast ye and your kind—*all* sinners and offenses against God in your devilish machines and evil electric light!" At the pause of Solomon's rock-hewn voice, the night around them fell dead silent. Then the rector's callused finger pointed at Leonard like a pistol. "We shant be tainted by your luciferic pleasures, and I warn you to *never* venture into our humble midsts! We embrace a life of poverty just as our Saviour did! So keep away from our fold."

And with that, the roughened Epiphanite turned and began to walk away as quickly as he'd arrived. But something irked Leonard, and he felt he had no choice but to inquire.

"Wait, er, sir? Mr. Solomon?"

The stern man turned, his face tensed to crevices like cracks in a dried creekbed. "That's *Rector* Solomon, of the Blessed Order of Epiphanites!"

"Uh, right, Rector Solomon," Leonard faltered. "But I was wondering—" Indeed, Leonard was, due to the Rector's initial comment. How could this man know what this house really was, and what took place here? Had he snuck up here one night and looked in the windows? Had he talked to the long-haired man—Asshole—whom Leonard had replaced? And if so, what consequences might be present?

"What did you mean when you said...you knew what we were doing up here?"

The narrowed eyes raged back. "Evil is blind *and* dense! That we *reckon* you and your kind is my meaning, young sinner! The *ungodliness* of your

lightbulbs and radios and television sets! The smile of *satan* in your motor-cars and aeroplanes! The evil—the pure and undiluted devil-bred *evil*, young man!—of your ovens and your washers and your toasters!" The rector turned and began to stomp down the weedy hill, waving a white-cuffed arm. "So stay thee behind us!"

Leonard watched after him for a moment, perplexed. "Well how do you like that?" he muttered under his breath. "Toasters are evil."

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Leonard almost appreciated Rector Solomon's peculiar intrusion, for it served to divert from the impact of his predicament. Later, he roamed the house without much purpose, just to walk, just to keep moving. If he kept moving he would be less prone to think very deeply and hence calculate this very incalculable situation.

In the first bedroom on the left, he was punched in the face by a stench. He flicked on the light, gagging, and saw the bloodstained drop cloths, the bloodstained work bench, and a bloodstained knitting needle on the floor. At least the body had been removed. In the corner, like an unnoticed scrap, lay something that resembled a crinkled piece of fried eggroll wrapper. Leonard left the room when he realized it was a slough of desiccated human skin.

Another bedroom stood completely empty, while another whose floor was also covered by plastic drop cloths, reeked of oaty excrement and dank animal smells. Leonard backed out.

In the last bedroom, he found the girls. They lay blissfully unconscious and curled up amongst one another on a bare, stained box-spring. Two stubby candles were lit, filling the room with flutters, and on the floor lay tell-tale spoons, rubber tubes, and narrow hypodermic needles. "No, daddy, don't!" Snowdrop blurted in her narcotized sleep. Then Sissy lolled up on an elbow, her near-dead eyes awake.

"Welcome to hell," she slurred and collapsed again.

Leonard blew the candles out and left, closing the door behind him.

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Suffice it to say, in summation rather than exposition, it was the aforementioned sequence of events that had supplanted Leonard to the current ordeal. The events had begun roughly ten months ago, and in those ten months he had used his prowess for motion photography to produce several dozen short films, or "loops," as they were called then, about twenty minutes each on an edited sixteen-millimeter master. Vinchetti aka "Vinch The Eye" was very pleased with the quality of Leonard's work as Rocco generally brought mentions of praise on his Friday night arrivals. Ninety percent of the works Leonard produced involved the sexual congress between animals and humans, namely Sissy and Snowdrop, who by some mode of miracle managed to stay alive for the entirety of those ten months. Dog flicks, donkey flicks, horse flicks, and pig flicks comprised the mainstay of Leonard's cinematic repertoire, and compilations thereof, and it was Leonard who devised snappy titles such as *Rebecca of Horse-Fuck*

Farm, Barnyard Babes, Makin' Bacon, Doinkin' Donkeys, Horsin' Around, etc.

As for the human element of these endeavors, it was generally Sissy who got the hardest end of the business as her cohort Snowdrop spent more time unconscious than awake. Poor Sissy. She was a trooper, though, a woman of considerable capability. For reasons Leonard never quite understood, pornographic cinema demanded one immutable priority: the externalization of the act, or what Rocco referred to as "The Wet Shot" or "The Money Shot." I.E., the displacement of the male ejaculant onto some aspect of the woman's physical geography. When the male contributor was human, this was an easily procured feat. An animal, however, proved much more difficult, yet it was here that Sissy excelled. Often the climactic requirements struck Leonard as disgusting to the point of absurdity. For instance, once Rocco and Knuckles had brought up a beautiful white Palomino stallion, and Rocco had demanded a "bagged shot." Leonard didn't even know what he meant but alas Sissy, the veteran, did. After performing preliminary fellatio on said steed and then adroitly achieving several positions of intercourse, she knelt up under the creature, slid back the sheath over the penile bone and then covered said penile bone with a clear plastic bag. Vigorously, then, and with learned skill, she manually masturbated the horse until such a time that it spent itself into the bag, providing a volume of cloudy, water-thin horse sperm that must've equaled something like eight ounces. That was a trick in itself but what Sissy did next took all trophies. "What, uh, what now?" Leonard asked, camera still running. Sissy made no verbal response. Instead she shrugged, she sighed,

and she upended the bag into her face. Most cascaded down her small-breasted chest, yet enough was caught in her mouth to appease the camera. Leonard, belly roiling, zoomed in on Sissy's face whereupon she swallowed to end all doubt.

"All in a day's work," she croaked, then hurried to the fungus-streaked bathroom to vomit.

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Such was the lion's share of Leonard's duties. What he'd always wanted: the director's chair. But it was also his job to process all the footage and then edit the "final cut" which provided the 16mm master that Rocco would pick up and turn in to the lab for mass duplication. About three-quarters of everything Leonard shot would later be cut; it was with the big Sankyo editor that hundreds and hundreds of feet of basic footage would be distilled down to the 20-30 minute master-cut. Leonard took pride in his editing, and he was very good at it. So what if this was animal pornography? *The job should still be done right,* he affirmed, and it wasn't like he had anything else to do.

And it was late one night during one of these editing sessions that Leonard noticed something *very* startling...

"Oh my...*God*," he muttered. Leonard cut the SLOW-FORWARD switch to STOP and blinked. He stared momentarily at the Sankyo's bright 9-by-11inch viewing screen. *Did I just see a...*

He blinked again, his mind holding.

The screen glowed in a brilliant green landscape of rolling hills—the hills, in fact, just behind the house out back. The mule flick Rocco ordered this week was in the can—and very much at the expense of Sissy and Snowdrop's hands and knees—whereupon Leonard had gone outside to shoot some title footage. Animal flick notwithstanding, it was a nice touch: rolling green hills and distant farmland. But now that he had the footage in the editor, he noticed this:

At the far left corner of the frame, a woman's face could be seen peering over an unruly hackberry hedge.

"Am I seeing things, or is there a face in the frame?"

Suddenly Leonard felt like the disconsolate photographer in *Blow Up*. "Oh, man," he thought. An interloper had strayed unseen onto his exterior set! Thank God the Sankyo had a heat-guard; he kept the frame frozen, then put a Leica 1x1 magnifier over the tiny, grainy face behind the hedge. A pretty face, for sure: oval and nearly cherubic, bright, inquisitive surf-green eyes. What Leonard couldn't figure, however, was the thing she was wearing on her head, not a hat, but a white cotton bonnet sort of thing, tied under the chin. Like something a pilgrim would wear.

He blinked further, gritting his teeth as he focused, and that's when the Sankyo's heat-guard gave up the ghost. The frame darkened, then bubbled, then burned.

And it was gone.

"Yes, I must be seeing things," he tried to convince himself. It was easier to believe that, though deep in his heart he suspected it was fantasy. Who could this person be, and what was she doing?

"No. I'm starving, I'm tired, and I've been held prisoner for months. It was nothing but hallucination..."

Fine. But one thing still bothered him. The strange tie-down bonnet that the *hallucination* wore on her head. Yes, it did indeed look like something a pilgrim woman would wear.

Or perhaps an Epiphanite.

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Sometimes "kinks" were required. These did not involve animals but instead an extreme manner of *human* participation. Sometimes the humans were Rocco's Mob pals, sometimes they were degenerates, or "stunt cocks," either paid or coerced to partake in the cinematic festivities. One night Rocco trooped in with all ten members of The Crew. "It's the Champagne Special tonight, kid. Get your camera." A Champagne Special, yes, but no bottles of Perrier-Jouet were in evidence. Instead, all members of the crew quite roughly fornicated with Sissy and Snowdrop and, at the proper moment, ejaculated into a champagne flute. After all of the boys had spent themselves—twice in some cases—there was a *formidable* accumulation of sperm in that glass. "Down the hatch, bitch," Rocco instructed of poor Sissy, handing her the flute. Leonard zoomed in as Sissy swallowed the entire contents of the glass in one gulp. Then "shower" loops: men urinating on the gals, into their mouths, into the vaginas. The "piss enema" provided a favorite variant: some gentleman voiding a full bladder into one of the girl's rectal vaults, after which she—usually poor Sissy—was required to pose for

Leonard's camera as she displaced the urine from her bowel in a spectacular gush. Tame, though, compared to the "scats," which required the girls to eat human and/or animal excrement...

Leonard, gratefully, had only had to film one "nek" flick in his career as underground pornographer. When one of the more attractive prostitutes on Vinchetti's "circuit" had died—be it via overdose or strangulation for "holding out," turning "CI" (Confidential Informant) or, indeed, dropping "dime" (the running of one's mouth to authorities)—the *corpus delectus* was expeditiously brought to the safehouse and several "stunts" would have sex with it. Rocco was always one of the stunts, donning the rubber Lyndon Johnson mask to conceal his identity. Pissing, shitting, and ejaculating on women was not technically illegal. Fucking a corpse, however, was, violating federal law and most state annotated codes as a first- or second-degree felony via some term such as gross sexual malfeasance or non-consensual congress. Leonard had filmed it all, though, like the obedient director he was, as Rocco and several other masked stunts had had a grand old time making whoopie with the dead woman. Afterwards, they left, ordering Leonard to bury her in the yard.

Leonard had seen some "wet" flicks in the previous film-maker's inventory but thankfully he'd never had to shoot one himself. A "wet" flick was a film involving extreme sadism. "White" meant fake, and "wet" meant real. This was a grainy, poorly lit feature in which a skinny young woman was stripped and hung by lashed wrists from a hook on the wall. A staunch implementation of torture was then purveyed: needles in the breasts, in the nipples, in the clitoris, like that. Not exactly *Thoroughly Modern*

Millie. While watching this particular feature, Leonard at least was able to convince himself that it couldn't possibly get worse but of course he was very wrong.

One night in the winter, Rocco and Knuckles had barged into the house by surprise, Knuckles shoving in a living female figure with her hands tied behind her back and a burlap sack over her head. "Get your camera, kid," Rocco had so ordered, something sharply hostile in his voice. Leonard did so, then followed the accommodating noise to the farthest bedroom—the "ready" room, Rocco called it. He called it the ready room because it was reserved for features that resulted in an invariable mess upon conclusion. These "messes" had, until tonight, of course, existed exclusively in the form of urine, feces, vomit, and semen—hence the room's perpetual carpet, so to speak, of plastic drop cloths which made cleanup quick and easy and prevented the excretions from permeating the room's hardwood floor. Yet when Leonard arrived in the ready room, it was not the expected "dime-dropping" or "holding-out" street prostitute that lay in wait. It was a robust, scrupulously clean and well-nourished woman in—Leonard guessed—her early 20s. She was beautiful, peaches and cream, the girl next-door, and Knuckles had lashed her, arms and legs widely parted, to a work bench built especially for such events. Her keen-hazel eyes couldn't have been wider in horror as they darted about. A rubber ball and strap sufficiently gagged her, reducing any vocal remonstrance to rough, muffled oddments of unpleasant noise.

Rocco shot Leonard a dagger glare. "Fuckin' Weinstein boned us bad, kid."

"Uh, who?" Leonard asked.

"Sixth District Appellate Court judge. We warned the fucker, we even offered him a hundred large to skim the case, but, no, that asshole had to think he's Super Judge. The motherfucker slapped life without parole on two of Vinch's Manhattan lieutenants. Vinch wants payback. Bigtime."

Leonard stood in a veil of subtle confusion. "So, uh, who's, uh, who's this woman?"

"Weinstein's fuckin' daughter, that's who," Rocco cracked back. "Fancy pants ritzy blue-blood bitch. She goes to Princeton, for Christ's sake. Belongs to fuckin' country clubs."

"Uh-oh," Leonard said.

"Vinch says we give her the works."

The works. This sounded rather ominous, and something deep in Leonard's gut did a quick hitch. He supposed it was the cryptic "scent of fear" that instilled itself about the room now, a hot, bitter tang wafting off the girl's skin in her sweat. Then Rocco withdrew a hypodermic needle and injected its contents into the judge's daughter's arm.

"What, uh, what's that, Mr. Rocco?" Leonard inquired.

"Pharm-grade speed. So she won't pass out from the pain. Vinch wants her feelin' the whole job," Rocco explained.

"Oh," Leonard said.

Then, Rocco again: "Knuckles. Get me Dick Nixon."

Yes, this was ominous, all right. *The masks*, Leonard realized. Rocco pulled the jowly rubber Richard Milhous Nixon mask over his head, while Knuckles followed suit with Barry Goldwater.

At least they were keeping it all in the party.

Then the likeness of America's 37th President pointed at Leonard and, as if by executive order, snapped, "Roll 'em!"

Leonard pulled a quick tracking shot, then homed in. "Your old man fucked up, bitch," Rocco said through the President's mouth-hole, and slapped the victim in the face. "So now *you're* fucked. We're gonna do a job on you that would make the devil puke."

Of that, Leonard had little doubt, and as the "job" began, he dissociated his sentient mind from the gist of the occasion and merely pretended he was shooting a...well, a political documentary. It was with a casual and even a *smooth* calm that Knuckles, as controversial Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, began to—*SNICK! SNICK! SNICK!*—clip off all of Ms. Weinstein's toes with a pair of boltcutters. With each *SNICK!* her back arched up off the workbench and her throat generated a sound, however muffled, reminiscent to a dog bark. Then came a series of smothered, high-tone *mewls* as Rocco pinched closed her nostrils, the gag-ball already blocking her oral airway. Her body gently convulsed as her face pinked; Rocco released her nose each time she was about to pass out. Then—*zzzip!*—he pulled out his long, thin penis and urinated liberally all over her. The urine and the fear-stench of her sweat about knocked Leonard out.

Knuckles dropped trow and stepped right up between her widely parted legs. A quick spit of saliva on her vagina and then he was humping away. For all of several seconds.

"Oooo, yeah," he grunted.

"Here comes the judge!" Rocco celebrated.

Rocco and Knuckles busted out laughter.

"I'm saving my nut for later, Knucks," Rocco elucidated. "The more I work on this bitch, the harder I get. Guess I had a bad childhood, huh?"

Rocco and Knuckles busted out laughter.

Leonard, on the other hand, had no inclination at all to laugh. He just kept his eye glued to the Canon's eyepiece and tried to get lost in its whir. The victim's gagged whine rose machinelike behind her throat as Rocco slapped Craftsman visegrips onto her rosebud nipples and *pulled*. Her eyes seemed lidless now; her delicate areolae were yanked out to a surprising length, like off-pink taffy, and Knuckles then did the same with her clitoris. Her body *bucked*, her wet back slapping the benchtop. Now Rocco was twisting the VGs, making pink corkscrews of flesh. Knuckles, far less articulate, merely stretched the clitoris and hood out as far as he could and then—*snip!*—quickly clipped off the fleshy bulb with a pair of tin-snips. This brought a sound like a gush of gravel from her muffled throat, and also a summary release of the entire contents of her bladder and bowel.

Now the room was a virtual *brew* of unearthly aromas. Leonard quite imagined the deepest grottoes of hell smelling the same.

And certainly the *scene*, too, provided a similar image. *I am the cameraman of hell*, Leonard mused.

With a frozen-food knife, Rocco sawed off both of her pretty little ears, with no more concern than if he were cutting off the ends of a French bread. Knuckles ran the lit end of a blow torch up and down her shins, turning them black in no time. More mewling, more bucking, more convulsant *slaps* of her bare, wet back against the bench's top. Rocco's intramuscular

injection of amphetamines into Ms. Weinstein's bloodstream did indeed keep her conscious through the job. Knuckles baked off her pubic hair and then cooked the raw meat of her genitalia until it resembled a forgotten hamburger patty left on the grill. Rocco cut a line across her forehead with a penknife and scalped her, yanking off the human wig with a suspicious expertise. The tin snips cut off her nose, and the frozen-food knife sawed off her breasts. Only now did her autonomic responses begin to simmer down to just feeble twitching.

"Knucks, gimme a shank."

Knuckles passed Rocco a knife—not the trademark German "Hoffried"-brand angel-blade that had divorced Leonard from a testicle, but a Gerber MkIII (nice shiv, by the way). "I'm hard as a fuckin' rock now," Rocco announced and slipped the blade from its sheath. "Gotta gut-fuck this bitch before she croaks."

The camera whirred and whirred and Leonard's mind swam and swam. Rocco planted the blade into her lower abdomen, then quickly crawled up and inserted his penis into the wound. He humped and humped, and without further delay—

"*Ahhhh, yeah!* I'm comin' in this bitch's stomach *fierce,* man! Fuckin'-A!"

Whether or not Ms. Weinstein was still alive at this moment scarcely mattered. The continued meager twitches of her body could've been involuntary muscle spasms of the peri-mortal state. Rocco finished dumping his semen into her abdomen, then slithered off. "Keep that camera rollin', kid. We ain't finished yet."

Not finished? came the aghast thought. *What else can you do to her?*

Leonard found out in short order when Rocco decapitated the woman with a twelve-inch coping saw. Leonard's teeth ground at the noise, a steady wet gristly gust, rocking back and forth. Then Knuckles seared graffiti lines of char over the rest of her body.

The stench couldn't have been worse now. Burned hair, burned flesh, shit, piss, and death-sweat. Leonard was only able to breathe through wincing hiccups as he tried his best to keep the camera on angle. "Last shot, kid," Rocco instructed. "Get a good closeup."

Rocco detached the strap and ball from the head's mouth, then sat down in a metal chair, his pants down to mid-thigh. At first it appeared that he'd merely placed the scalped head in his lap but in a moment the crucial detail was made obvious. Rocco had inserted his penis into the esophagal entrance where her neck had been severed, and now—

"Ahhhh," Rocco intoned. "How ya like *that*, your Honor?"

—he was urinating yet again, only now the urine spewed from the dead girl's mouth. Leonard rolled in the zoom for a close angle shot, then retreated for the final image: Richard Nixon pissing out of a severed head's mouth.

"All right, cut it, kid. Good job." When Leonard turned off the camera, Rocco dropped the head, pulled his pants up, and yanked off the Nixon mask. "We'll be back tomorrow," Rocco said, waving his hand at the stench. "Have the print developed and ready. We want to mail it to the judge soon as possible."

"Uh, right," Leonard affirmed.

Rocco and Knuckles made their exit, leaving Leonard at least with the proud credit of having just made his first official snuff film.

Later, while the film was in the processor, he buried the body and the head in the back yard, and he buried the charnel drop cloth.

The room, though, would continue to stink for weeks to come.

«««—»»»

Leonard supposed that the above represented the peak of his film-making for the Mob. The rare other "specials" seemed tame by comparison. Though there were some other specials. Occasionally, Rocco would bring up bums, homeless men—"rummies," he called them. Leonard filmed these unfortunate men as the even more unfortunate Sissy and Snowdrop were ordered to perform fellatio on penises that clearly had not been washed in years or even decades. Sagging, mite-infested scrotums raised a stench that even Leonard could smell halfway across the room. And sores, herpes, foreskins laden with smegma were not excuses to desist. "Go on, honey," Rocco ordered Sissy as he watched once. "A little dickcheese ain't gonna hurt ya. Hell, I shoulda brought some Ritz!"

Rocco and Knuckles busted out laughter.

On one occasion, they'd brought up an articulate, cologned mulatto man in his '50s nicknamed "Plugger." Plugger spoke in a tint of a femmy English accent, and was very well-poised. He ran the initial accounting den for Harlem's numbers racket, which Vinchetti's crime family got one-third of.

He always wore a tan leisure suit with a chocolate-brown silk shirt, the collar out. Yet the front of his pants seemed...*stuffed* with something.

Leonard saw with what when Plugger took his pants off.

"Ain't that somethin', kid?" Rocco remarked, a smile in his eye.

Plugger had a very rare disease syndrome known as endogenitalitis with resultant "counter hypogonadism." And pituitary irregularity combined with an inability to regulate zinc oxide metabolites from infancy to pre-adolescence caused this bizarre affliction which struck only one in ten million. Ninety percent of all male sufferers died by the age of eleven, while ninety-*nine* percent of females died. What the syndrome entailed exactly was a hyper-accelerated growth of the sex organs. They essentially *never stopped growing.*

Hence was Plugger, a rare survivor. By age 50, the syndrome had turned his penis and gonads into *things* that scarcely looked as such now. A scrotum stretched to the point of shining, housing lumpen testicles the size of boiler onions. A penile shaft that, flaccid, measured sixteen inches long and probably four wide. A glans big around as a navel orange.

"Holy shit," Leonard muttered.

Then it was lights, camera, and action. "A delectable measure of talent," Plugger complimented as Sissy and Snowdrop fervently laved the elephantine genitals with their tongues. They were antsy tonight, fired up and nearly shivering in their zeal, for both were close to clinical withdrawal. "Twins of passion," Plugger commented, lounging back on the floor, manicured hands behind his head. "You, blondie," Rocco gestured Snowdrop. "Do that finger thing like last time."

"Huh?" Snowdrop squinted at him.

Rocco kicked her in the side of the head. "Stick your finger in his dickhole!"

Snowdrop, her memory refreshed, was quick to comply. "A most tantalizing combination of sensations," Plugger pointed out. Snowdrop sheened her index finger with saliva and inserted it into Plugger's urethra, drew it fully in and out as Sissy masturbated the mammoth tube of flesh with both hands. Rocco articulated, "Yeah, it takes two hands to handle the whopper!"

Rocco and Knuckles busted out laughter.

Now Snowdrop was drawing two, then *three* fingers in and out of Plugger's urethra.

It took at least twenty minutes of proper attention before Plugger's penis came fully erect. And, erect, it proffered a terrifying vision. It looked like some strange, glistening and puffy sea creature. Eyeless, with a puckered mouth. Beneath which sat the bloated scrotum traced with veins.

Rocco took the camera away from Leonard. "Okay, kid, here's where I take over. Hate to do this to ya but it's how Vinch wants it."

"Um, what?" Leonard asked.

"Have one of the bitches blow ya till you get hard, then fuck Plugger."

Leonard stared. Blinked. Gulped. "You want me to, uh, *sodomize* the man?"

Rocco frowned, setting the Canon on his shoulder. "No, kid, you ain't gotta butt-fuck him. Get your willy up and fuck his *dick*."

"Um...oh," Leonard said.

Plugger winked at him, grinned with—believe it or not—a gold tooth. "Step right up, my boy. It'll be *grand!*"

Leonard sorely doubted that it would be grand. Sissy briskly sucked his cock amid a flurry of wet, smacking sounds as Leonard squeezed his eyes shut and thought very resolutely about the hostess at the Widow's Walk. He thought long and hard but, alas, it took some time before Leonard could achieve the necessary erection considering what he would resultantly be required to do with it.

"Come on, kid," Rocco griped. "You're pissin' me off. Raise that crane and get with it. The Yankees are playing fuckin' Baltimore tonight."

"Hurry!" Sissy whispered up to him, a grim plea in her eyes. "Don't get him mad!"

It was a good point. Thus far, Leonard had managed to avoid Rocco's wrath, and he facilitated this simply by doing what he was told. *Do as you're told,* Leonard thought desperately. Perhaps it was the fear element, then, but against all odds, Leonard finally achieved an erection—

"Yeah, good, good woody, kid," Rocco praised from behind the camera. "Now fuck Plugger's dick and come in it."

Leonard considered that these were perhaps the most absurd words ever spoken in the history of civilization. "That's the spirit, son!" Plugger elated, standing now and holding out the strange tube of meat. The urethral entry was already well-lubricated with Snowdrop's spit, so Leonard—

—stared. Blinked. And gulped—

—and then admitted his penis into Plugger's urethral tract.

It was a tight fit, yet Plugger, the passive partner of this standing duo, made no protest. Leonard held Plugger's shaft as he moved his hips back and forth. More strained thoughts then, of the Widow's Walk's pert and horny hostess, the new girl on *Charlie's Angels*, Helga on *Hogan's Heroes*, the cover of Roxy Music's *Country Life*, and, the end-all: Mary Ann from *Gilligan*, and those preeminent packed breasts, the tan tummy, and the cute little farm-girl bellybutton. What was a farm girl doing on the *Minnow* anyway? Didn't she have fields to tend to? What the fuck was a *farm girl* doing on a three-hour tour?

The questions aside, the images sufficed. Leonard successfully ejaculated quite quickly into Plugger's penis, rifling what seemed a dozen hard spurts of semen.

"Mmmmmm, a hot one," Plugger approved and winked.

"Hey," Rocco cracked from behind the whirring camera. "Maybe you'll have a dick-baby!"

Rocco and Knuckles busted out laughter.

Leonard exhaled in a blurt, and withdrew, and with that came the most absurd thought of all: *I just came in a man's dick...*

"Watch this, kid! This is great!" Rocco enthused.

Sissy, on her knees, inclined her face toward the ceiling, open-mouthed like a chick awaiting nourishment from a dutiful hen. Plugger walked over, his fingers pinching off his urethra. Then he lowered the gargantuan cock to the target sight, released his fingers, and out fell all of Leonard's sperm directly into Sissy's waiting mouth.

That was about it for Leonard; the acknowledgment that he had just had coitus with a penis was not easy to cope with, after all. Rocco gave back the camera, and Leonard filmed the rest in a mercifully forgetful blur: Plugger slicking his swollen penis up with Noxema, then sodomizing both girls until he eventually ejaculated white worms into Sissy's face.

"What a man!" Rocco obliged later, and slapped Leonard on the back. "Your daddy'd be proud!"

"Damn straight," added Knuckles. "I know mine would."

Leonard, mind-blown, rather doubted that his dear, dead father would approve of his son's fornicating with another man's penis, not that he paid it much mind. Instead he retreated to the dark room to begin processing this latest snippet of dementia. There seemed no end, now, to the limits to which human sexual activity could be exploited for the purposes of perversion.

And the girls, by the way, bled for days.

«««—»»»

On the night they brought the pig, Leonard was in the cutting room trying to tune in the SoundDesign FM radio. (There was an 8-track player, too, and a record "changer.") Sometimes at night he could pull in D.C.-area stations, which were a godsend. Leonard had been weaned, so to speak, on WHMC from Montgomery County, Maryland, namely the Barry Richards Show, "The Home of The Heavy, Heavy Head"; back when music had some artistic integrity with the likes of Lothar and the Hand People, the original King Crimson (not this watered-down-for-money-with-some-bald-guy-in-

the-group shit they were doing today), early Pink Floyd, and Sir Lord Baltimore, which made the hard rock of the '90s look like The Mickey Mouse Club. As the early '70s degraded into the mid-'70s, Richard's show bit the dust at about the same time as Chuck Colson and E. Howard Hunt. Along, then, came the next wave of music that was supposed to defy commercial strictures: Peter Hammill's terraschizoid warbling with Van der Graaf Generator, Throbbing Gristle, the Buzzcocks before Howard Devoto quit, Hawkwind, Robert Calvert, Adrian Wagner, Magma, the Fripp and Eno projects, and tons more good shit that perpetuated music as an art form. No Lemonheads in this bunch, fella. No doubt, there was no No Doubt, and you can bet your corona The Spice Girls weren't nothing but yet-to-be-produced sperm cells in their Brit daddies' balls where they really-really-really-really-really should've stayed.

But that was then, and this was...well, this was a 1977 Mafia safehouse in rural New York into which broken down heroin addicts were forced to have sex with animals. All the *local* radio waves provided were evangelical stations and dim talk shows. However, on luck's infrequent visitations, Leonard could snatch WGTB from Georgetown University, and John Page's "Abstraction Show," or WAMU's "Rock and Roll Jukebox" which *never* played rock and roll unless you consider Robert Wyatt, Perubu, and The Residents rock and roll. It was these wee-hour musical fugue states that got Leonard by, that allowed him to retain some infinitesimal sliver of his actual spirit.

Sissy and Snowdrop moaned intermittently from their back room, dry-heaving and well into the closing vise of withdrawal. Leonard stared at the

wall behind the big Sankyo editor and Bolex titler as lilting strains of Brian Eno's "Discreet Music" washed over him. Leonard, for no estimable reason, thought: *Wasn't it Eno who said that if variety is the spice of life, then monotony is the sauce?* But—ug—sauce. It reminded Leonard that they were down to their last three cans of Giant-brand spaghetti, and he'd had to cut it to half-rations to begin with. Rocco never brought enough heroin or food, and more often than not, Leonard preferred to starve than to break down and consume more dog food. Coppola didn't eat dog food, Cimino didn't (though he would after he released *Heaven's Gate*), so—

Why should I?

Eno ebbed out, nearly inaudibly, giving over to Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music*. Then the commotion barged in, loud footfalls on the wood floors and—

"Oink, oink, oink—"

Did Lou Reed have pig noises on *MMM*? Leonard didn't think so. He got up and went to the living room.

"Vinch needs a pig flick, kid," Rocco announced, and slapped a bag of heroin on the table. *A pig flick.* Leonard scarcely batted an eye, for by now he'd made several, and these were by far the most difficult from the managing standpoint—managing the animal, that is. Dogs, mules, horses—they were easy compared to the mammalian genus *sus vittatus.* They were feisty, sometimes downright vicious. At least Leonard had a modicum of an edge in that he'd helped raise pigs on his father's farm as a child.

"Sure," Leonard tried to enthuse to his boss. "No problem."

"And here's the star," Rocco announced. Scampering circles about the living room, and amid a cacophony of protesting chortles, was what looked to be about a 150-pound Chester, white with a few black splotches. Its hoofs ticked maddeningly on the wood floor as Knuckles let go of its leash. "Get in there, ya fuckin' pig!" he complained, and kicked the animal on its flank.

Rocco obliviously rubbed his crotch. "Shit, my dick's hard," he announced. "I'm gonna fuck me one of them dirty bitches. Kid, go help Knuckles bring in the food."

Thank the fates, Leonard thought through a sigh. *Food.* His gut ached as he followed the gargantuan Knuckles out to the Deville. "Nice night, huh, Mr. Knuckles?" Leonard offered a cordiality. Knuckles unlocked the trunk, let it bob open. "Shaddap," he said, and pointed to the grocery bag. Leonard's lips pursed. *Only one bag,* he considered. Usually they brought two: one for dog food, one for people food.

Hmm.

"Take the bag in the house, then get your ass back out here and clean the pig shit outa the backseat," Knuckles said.

Leonard froze for part of a moment. It was not easy being here in the first place. Nor was it easy existing in a near-constant state of blood-ketosis only because these cheap-suited assholes were too incompetent to bring enough food. It was not easy making animal movies, nor was it easy keeping two clinical heroin addicts alive. And now—*now*—here was this cement-for-brains Mafioso thug ordering him to clean *pig shit* out of the car. Leonard's thoughts churned, and something inside his spirit snapped, and at the

conclusion of that moment he came very close to replying: *Fuck you, you dago moron whop motherfucker.*

But of course he didn't actually say it, he thought it. To actually *say* it would have been *extremely* inadvisable. This, after all, was the man who had removed Leonard's left testicle, and they didn't call him Knuckles for nothing. Nevertheless, as Leonard's better judgement revisited him, he wilted.

I won't tell this guy off because I'm afraid. Because I don't have the courage. I'm a weakling, a coward...

Knuckles slapped Leonard in the back of the head. "Ya hear me, kid?"

Leonard gulped. "Yes. Yes, Mr. Knuckles. I'll take the bag in the house and then clean the...pig shit out of the back seat."

"Good, boy. Good little wussy."

Leonard reached down to pick up the grocery bag. Paused. Blinked and stared. He rummaged through it then and saw only a dozen cans of Giant-brand Big Chunk Beef dog food.

Leonard turned with steel in his eyes. "This is just dog food. Where's the spaghetti for me and the girls?"

"We forgot to pick some up."

Leonard ground his teeth. "We've only got three cans left, and you guys won't be back up here for another week."

Knuckles scraped something nonchalantly out of his nostril. "Like I give a shit? Now take the fuckin' bag in the fuckin' house and then get your fuckin' ass back out here and clean the fuckin' pig shit outa the fuckin' back seat."

"Fuck you, you dago moron whop motherfucker," Leonard calmly replied. "Clean the pig shit out your fucking self."

The succession of blows which followed this remark was lost to Leonard. All he knew was that Knuckles very expertly had Leonard wheezing on the ground a split second later. His head hurt. His stomach hurt. His chest hurt. He couldn't breathe.

But he *could* wail when Knuckles grabbed him by a fistful of hair and dragged him back in the house.

"Fuckin' art school college boy punk talkin' to *me* like that? We'll see what Rocco says. Hope he lets me take your other nut."

Back in the house Leonard was—*ka-clunk!*—dropped on the living room floor like a bag of blocks. Rocco did not immediately notice this however, as he was in the process of briskly sodomizing Snowdrop. He sort of grunted with each thrust, and it almost seemed that the pig mimicked these grunts with a few of its own while it snuffled and skittered about the corners of the room. Snowdrop lay splayed on her belly, either unconscious or comatose.

"Goddamn!" Rocco exclaimed as he exerted himself through the motions. "Here ya go bitch, here's some milk for yer fudge," and then, "Ahhhh!"

The pelvic pumpings slowed, then abated. Snowdrop lay motionless, showing the brown eye. "Shit, bitch, your asshole's bigger than a fuckin' gopher hole. Bet you've had more cock goin' *into* your ass than shit comin' *out*." Rocco, after this kind compliment, hoisted up his slacks, and it was then that he noticed Knuckles standing there with a bloody-faced Leonard at his feet.

"Knuckles, what'choo jack the kid out for?"

"Shit, boss, he called me a—"

"Help the kid up, you schmuck," Rocco ordered. "Vinch says the movies he shoots are the best animal flicks he's ever seen, and you wanna go busting him up?"

"But, boss," Knuckles countered. "He called me a, a, a dago moron whop motherfucker."

"Yeah? And ya know somethin', Knuckles. You *are* a dago moron whop motherfucker. What are you, stupid? Your mamma raise a dumbell? Anything happens to the kid, what'choo think Vinchetti'll say?"

Knuckles mouth dropped open. "Uhhh—"

Rocco cut a sharp frown. "Yeah, *uhhh*. He'll say drop that asshole Knuckles in the Hudson, that's what he'll say. Now help the kid up and don't never touch him again. Understand?"

Knuckles was actually shaking when he nodded the affirmative and helped Leonard to his feet. "Thank you," Leonard croaked.

"He's, uh, he's pissed we forgot the spaghetti," Knuckles said.

Rocco tapped himself on the head. "Oh, shit, kid. I'm really sorry about that. We got so much shit goin' on sometimes we forget. Just try to rough it for the next week, huh? And I promise, we'll bring ya up some good grub next time, okay?"

What else could Leonard say?

"Okay," he said.

"No problem. Hey, watch the pig, kid. And shoot us up a nice flick."

Leonard grabbed the leash, holding the pig back as Rocco and Knuckles went out the kitchen door. *Could've been worse,* he reckoned. A lot worse. At least he could be proud of the praise: *I make the best animal movies in the country.*

He looked out into the driveway and received even a smidgen more satisfaction. Rocco kicked Knuckles in the pants and shouted, "Clean the pig shit outa the backseat you asshole! I ain't ridin' all the way back to Trenton smellin' *pig shit!*"

«««—»»»

Leonard sucked down one of the last three cans of spaghetti. He was probably down to 120 pounds now, a broomstick in dirty jeans and a Hawkwind T-shirt. Hawkwind's ham-fisted sci-fi chord-pounding in fact jazzed from the radio this very minute; "That's the spirit of the age," a deaf-in-one-ear Robert Calvert vocalled. *Yeah, it sure is,* Leonard thought. *Living on spaghetti and dog food, making underground porno movies for the Mafia.* The pig chortled, chewed at his pantleg.

"Hope you're horny, little buddy," Leonard said to the pig.

Snowdrop still lay unconscious on her belly in the living room, flattened by the rectal going-over Rocco had treated her to. Her anus looked like an empty eye socket.

"Snowdrop! Get up!" Leonard commanded in a loud voice. "Sissy! Come on out here!"

Neither girl responded.

"I've got heroin!"

That roused them. Snowdrop rolled over at once, sat up and looked at Leonard, her dead eyes alighted. Sissy straggled out wearing only stained panties. Her strands of pasty hair resembled enslimed tentacles of some Lovecraftian thing.

"Gimme, gimme," she groaned.

"Please please please," Snowdrop groaned.

"Not yet." Leonard sat down on the crusty couch. "We have to talk—"

"I don't wanna to talk, I wanna fire up!" Snowdrop yelled.

Leonard almost slapped her in the face but elected not to at the last second. He was not a violent person, and this predicament certainly wasn't her fault. "In a minute," he said. How the girls were not dead already mystified him. *God works in strange ways*, he thought. But, no, it wasn't God, it had to be the Devil. God would not protract the misery of heroin addicts solely for the purpose of making animal movies for the mob. "We're in dire straits," he (Leonard, not God) began. "Rocco's not coming back for a week and we only have two cans of spaghetti left. We're all seriously malnourished; if we don't eat, we'll die. And that means we're going to have to eat dog food."

"I don't wanna eat, I wanna fire up!" Snowdrop yelled.

"Gimme, gimme," Sissy pleaded. Standing like a parched zombie, her dirty hands reaching out, she urinated in her panties without realizing it.

"Rocco and Knuckles brought up a pig, they want a pig movie. You girls know how hard pig movies are." He could hear the pig scuffling around in

the kitchen, oinking. "We're going to have to work very hard to make this pig movie good."

"I don't wanna fuck pigs, I wanna fire up!" Snowdrop yelled.

"Gimme!" Sissy yelled.

Leonard sighed. "And as usual, Rocco didn't bring enough heroin. I'll only be able to give each of you one bag a day."

"Fuck!" Snowdrop yelled. "We'll die!"

"Gimme, gimme," Sissy pleaded.

Leonard gave them each one bag of heroin. "Here's your heroin. Tomorrow we start the movie." They scurried off to their room like starving chipmunks who'd just happened upon a few acorns.

From the cutting room, John Wetton sang "Starless and...bible-black," from E.G. Record's 1974 King Crimson album entitled *Red.*

«««—»»»

Animal management, yes. That's what it was all about.

Dogs were a cinch; they realized what was going on, and what they were supposed to do. Horses and mules? They pretty much just stood there and let the girls down their thing. Easy. But pigs?

"Owwww!" Snowdrop yelped. "The fucker *bit* me! It bit me on the back!"

Three days now they'd been at it. Leonard made the girls eat in the morning, then they'd shoot all day and into the night, and then he'd give them their "ten bag." First day? Could've been worse. They split the last two cans of spaghetti three ways. It wasn't bad. But after that, the daily menu

changed cuisines. *Beef & Cheese Flavor, Hearty Chicken Dinner, Big Chunk Beef, Beef & Liver.* Snowdrop preferred *Big Chunk Beef,* by the way. Sissy was partial to *Beef & Cheese.*

By Day Four, Leonard was contemplating suicide. Abduction, slavery, animal movies, and dog food did not afford most men any sense of purpose or actualization. For all this time, he'd been living for the Sundance Film Festival announcements, but of course how would they even contact him if he won? And was Rocco really going to let him go after his "obligation" was met? Leonard kinda doubted it. So why go on?

Hope, perhaps? Or maybe providence?

"He's kind of cute, though," Sissy observed, kneeling naked next to the irate pig. "He's like Arnold on *Green Acres.*"

"That's great," Leonard complained from behind the lowered Canon. "So try to make cute little Arnold have sex with you."

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"Well, Snowdrop could help," Sissy griped.

"Fuck you! The fucker bit me!" came Snowdrop's retort, rubbing her wound.

"You have to be...dainty with him," Leonard suggested. "Pigs are ornery, irritable. You don't just spread your legs and pull him on. You've got to use finesse."

Leonard's Guide To Animal Movies.

"I'm stringing," Snowdrop said. Leonard's instructions went in one ear and out the other. "I need to take another bang."

"No," Leonard put his verbal foot down. "You already had yours for the day, both of you."

"Yeah, Leonard," Sissy piped in. "We can't do this when we're this strung."

"No! Now what you have to do is—"

"Come on, Leonard. We'll blow you," Snowdrop offered.

"Yeah, real good," Sissy seconded the motion. "And you can fuck us too."

"No!" God, women! They tried this stunt every night, not realizing that Leonard would sooner put his penis into a dumpster drain. By now emaciation reduced their breasts to meager dirty bags of skin; their hips and joints stuck out like death-camp girls, and their eyes... Well, their eyes always looked dead.

Part of Leonard, at times, hated these malodorous twig-women but generally he felt sorry for them. How could he not? None of this was their fault. *But it's not mine either,* he reminded himself.

"All right, here's what I'll do," he negotiated. "We've already got the two blowjobs and the two fucks, so all that's left is the shooter for the final scene..."

"Fuck that," Snowdrop insisted. "Sissy can do the shooter."

"Fuck you," Sissy spat back, "I always do the shooters—"

"Do not!"

"Do too! And I have to do most of everything anyway 'cos you're always passed out!"

"Do not!"

"Do too!"

"Shut up!" Leonard shouted.

The room fell silent, save for the pig's spare shimmies.

"Here's what I'll do. Give me the shooter, right now, and I'll give you one bag to split between you."

"Okay!"

"Okay!"

"Dainty!

"Finesse!"

That got them roused. There'd be hell to pay on Thursday when they were one bag short but Leonard would worry about that later. It was amazing what a prize at the end of the rainbow could compel people to do. Regardless of the pig's remonstrations, Snowdrop and Sissy worked together as a team. They got nipped a few times, and hooved, but after only another hour or two under the hot Dedolight LHB-4s, they managed to provide enough rough footage for a scene-lead and then...

The "shooter."

This was tricky, this was *very* tricky. Getting a pig to ejaculate externally was tough enough but *this?* A *shooter* scene?

The boned-up pig stood chortling in the middle of the room, uncomprehending and pissed off by what it had been subjected to these past few days. It clearly did *not* want to have sexual contact with human beings, so perhaps pigs came from a higher moral echelon than homo sapiens. (Well, it was something to consider anyway. The pig seemed to *know* that this was not right. But humans? Forget it!)

Sissy did most of the preludial attending, very gingerly touching and then stroking "Arnold's" sheathed penis. Eventually she was allowed to actually stroke the off-pink sheath back and forth over the penile bone (all male mammals possessed an actual bone in their penises which extended into the penile shaft when aroused. Primates were the only exceptions). Once the bone suitably filled the "erectile pass," that meant that the pig was gonna blow. "Snowdrop!" Sissy exclaimed. "Get the frying pan!"

Leonard got down on his knees for the C.U. while Snowdrop stumbled back with the inexplicable Teflon I frying pan.

A frying pan?

The utensil served as the necessary collection device. Getting the pig to squirt directly into a shot glass, of course, would've been impossible, but with the frying pan—

"Give me that, you stoner!" Sissy griped and took the pan from Snowdrop. Snowdrop, a moment later, sidled over and passed out on the floor.

"Careful, careful," Leonard warned. His eye was pressed to the Canon's eyepiece. "You've got to get it all in the pan for the camera—"

"He's getting ready, I think—"

Sissy hunkered down, one hand still stroking Arnold's pig dick, the other holding the fry pan in the target area. The pig's dick, by the way—now that the skin-sheath was retracted—shone a bright glistening pink and looked...well, kind of corkscrewy, akin to its tail. Arnold's intermittent chortles staid just then; Sissy stroked faster and—

"There he goes!"

Leonard got it all in the shot: a spectacular pig ejaculation. It drizzled down rather wildly, and most of it was indeed caught by the frying pan.

"Good, Arnold!" Sissy rewarded. "That's a good little pig!"

Goddamn right, Leonard thought. The pig's overall reaction to climaxing was not profound. It merely stood there, came in the fry pan, and that was that. Then it belted out a few grunts and hurried away.

"Okay," Leonard continued directing. He pulled the camera back, meticulous to keep the fry pan in frame continuously. If it disappeared for even a single frame, then the customer would dismiss it all as fake, and that was not allowed, no, not in Mafia animal movies. "You know what to do," Leonard croaked.

Tragically, Sissy did. She sat on the floor with the fry pan in her naked lap, then carefully offered the camera a view of the contents. (Pig sperm, for those interested, was quite unlike the human variety. Pretty much just water with long infinitesimal white threads floating in it.) "Slowly now," Leonard instructed, pulling back a little more. "Don't spill any..."

Sissy slowly poured the pig sperm from the frying pan into a shot glass. Leonard zoomed in. Focused now and followed the shot glass up to Sissy's face. Then she brought the glass to her lips and shot it back, and there they had it. The "shooter" scene.

Leonard maintained the hold as Sissy swallowed it, licked her lips and opened her mouth as proof.

Then she threw up on the floor.

«««—»»»

The pig flick, now, was officially over. As promised, Leonard gave the girls one bag of heroin to split amongst them; they scampered to their room like gleeful cadavers, and Leonard suspected that they'd be out of his hair till morning.

He was wrong.

Just as he was tuning in GTB and preparing to process the last of the film, he was beckoned.

"Leonard!"

"Bad, *bad* pig!"

Oh, man. What's wrong now? Leonard wondered.

He tromped back to the girls' room, not calculating anything of serious note...until he heard—

"What the hell's going on in there!" he bellowed and broke into a trot.

The noise which issued from the back room came as a collision of outraged female shrieks, high-pitched pig squeals, and a steady clunking

and thrashing. It sounded like a rumble in there.

WHACK! WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

And what accompanied each WHACK was a gust of something part mewl, part shimmy, like someone impacting a dog toy with a stick.

Only the sticks, in this case, were a couple of two-by-fours, and the dog toy...was the pig.

Sissy and Snowdrop were beating "Arnold" with the two-by-fours.

The sight held Leonard in a momentary stasis. WHACK! WHACK! WHACK! WHACK! He stood there and stared. WHACK! WHACK! WHACK! WHACK! His mouth hung open and his arms drooped at his sides. In only seconds the two naked 90-pound girls had successfully beaten the pig to the floor.

"Motherfuckin' pig!" Snowdrop maniacally screamed.

"Give it back!" Sissy shrieked.

"Gonna send you to pig heaven, fucker!"

"Bad, *bad* pig!"

WHACK! WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

More incredulous staring on Leonard's part. He seemed frozen by this spectacle. Now the pig lay bloodied and quivering on the floor. A few futile chortles then, a few shivers. Then it threw up and died.

Leonard snapped. "You assholes! You killed the pig!" He thunked immediately to his knees and uselessly applied his hands to the pig in some unknown gesture. He felt no heartbeat nor pulse. Nothing. Nothing but a plume of pig puke and a dead Chester pig.

"It ate our smack!" Sissy defiantly yelled.

"Yeah!" Snowdrop joined her. "The little fucker scarfed our skag."

Leonard looked up, fire in his eyes. "You're telling me that the pig *ate* your heroin?"

Sissy was trembling, her waxpaper-like skin glazed with the sweat of exertion. "Damn right, Leonard! We worked hard for that junk and the pig came in here and started biting us and he ate it."

"*The pig ate the heroin?!*" Leonard bellowed again.

Snowdrop countered, her tiny tit-flaps waving in her tirade: "We were about to fire up and the little fucker barges in here trying to eat us, and the bag of junk was on the floor and he ate it! He ate the candles too!"

Leonard felt fit to cry. *The pig ate the heroin. The girls killed the pig.* Could anything've been more ludicrous? Leonard put his face in his hands.

"Don't you girls realize that Rocco's coming back here on Friday? He's coming to pick up the movie. And you know what else he's coming to pick up? He's coming to pick up the pig. So what am I going to tell him? ‘Gee, Mr. Rocco, sorry. The girls beat the pig to death with two-by-fours'? That won't float! He'll kill us!"

The tenor of Leonard's complaint, and the implication that came with it, had little effect. "We don't care, Leonard!" Sissy shrilled.

"Yeah," Snowdrop added. "We need more junk!"

"Give us our junk, Leonard!"

"Yeah!"

"That goddamn pig you made us fuck ate our bag, so give us more!"

Leonard could only continue staring. They didn't care about living. They only cared about heroin. *Fuck it,* Leonard reasoned. He reached into his pocket and tossed the remaining bags of heroin at them. "Here. Shoot yourselves to Palookaville."

The girls fell on the bags like a fumble drill, squealing exuberance. Leonard leaned over and began to drag the dead pig out of the room.

«««—»»»

"It's 1977! I hope I go to heaven!" Joe Strummer gruffly belted out from the first Clash album. Zyra's show on WGTB started at 9 p.m. every Monday night—this new stuff called Punk Rock. Groups with what Leonard thought of as silly and pretentious names like the Adverts, the Vibrators, Johnny Mo-ped, the Stranglers, and some bunch of frivolous idiots called the Sex Pistols. Leonard didn't much care for it; it seemed to portend the future's end of music. *Where's Phil Manzanera when I need him?* But at least this new Punk stuff beat the Starland Vocal Band. X-Ray Specks broke into "Oh Bondage Up Yours" as Leonard dragged the pig across the living room floor.

What I am gonna do now? he worried. *What's Rocco going to say?* Leonard supposed burying the pig was his only recourse. He could say it got away or something. Shit, he didn't know. To make matters worse, after the next tug of the pig's hind legs, its bowel voided, leaving curls of excrement on the floor, and it was at that very moment when—

Oh, man!

—there was a knock at the door.

«—»

"You're the girl in the—" but then Leonard cut it off quick. What could he say? *When I was splicing the end title footage on Two Mules for Sister Snowdrop, I got a quick hold of your face in the b.g.*

"Can I come in?" his visitor hurried, looking over her shoulder. And, yes, there was no doubt. *The same girl behind the hedge,* Leonard couldn't deny. A spartan black ankle-dress, clunky black shoes, billowed sleeves with white cuffs, and the white tie-down bonnet with tendrils of blond hair escaping. Before Leonard could even think about inviting her in, she squeezed by him in the doorway as if fleeing killers.

"Fuck," she said and sighed when he closed the door. "Thanks."

"What's, uh— I mean—"

"I'm Esther, I just snuck out of the compound and I think my fuckin' brother saw me."

But Leonard was stunned. *The compound?* "You must be one of the...Epiphanites," he finally voiced. "Any relation to Rector Solomon?"

The girl snorted as her gaze roved the dilapidated living room. "Yeah, he's my fuckin' grandfather, the old fuck. Hey, you got any booze or pot?"

"Uh, no, I'm sorry," Leonard said. *And I'm fresh out of Burmese heroin too, but I've got lots of dog food...* Only now was he beginning to lineate his thoughts. An outsider was in the house—a Mafia *safe* house. He'd flopped

the dead pig into the kitchen and closed the door, and Snowdrop and Sissy were comatose in back. But still, he had to be very careful.

"I apologize for the smell," he said of the house's fetor. "I'm a...a dog breeder."

"Oh, yeah? I saw the pens out back." She pulled an end of a tie string and off came the bonnet. Luxuriant honey-blond hair spilled out. *She's beautiful*, Leonard thought dumbly. Even in the austere apparel. An ample bosom filled the top of the dress, close to stretching against big, clunky, hand-sewn buttons.

"Is there...something I can do for you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, still letting her eyes roam. "Wow. Electric light, haven't seen that in a while. My mother escaped the compound when she was a teenager, went to Philly, got into drugs, you know the scene. By the time Solomon found her, I was 14, and he brought me back here. Fuck, that place is the pits, and I've been cooped up in my room all week 'cos we just had the Penitation."

"The—"

She waved a small callused hand. "It's part of the whole freak show he's got going down there. They're religious crackpots. Every other week they've got some fucked-up rite or celebration. The Epiphanites believe that the more hardship you suffer, the less seriously you'll be judged by God when you die. Bunch'a crap." She sat down on the flyblown couch and smiled, as though its rusted springs were a great luxury. "But the Penitation is the worst one 'cos nobody's allowed to talk or even leave their rooms for a week... Say, is that *pig shit* on the floor?"

Oops. "Oh, sorry about that," Leonard murmured. "It's, uh, well, one of the dogs had an accident. I'll clean it up right now."

The girl—Esther—tossed her head and laughed. "Don't bother. We're farmers down there—I see animal shit all the time."

Leonard's eyes remained inadvertently fixed on her. "You were saying something about the compound?"

She kicked off her clunky shoes and put two white-stocking'd feet up on the couch arm. "Yeah, and Solly's on a rampage now. The entire congregation's shitting bricks 'cos the pig got away."

Something like a rock seemed to form in Leonard's throat. His eyes threatened to bug out. After a few moments, she looked up at him.

"Are you okay?"

Snap.

"Oh, yes, yes," Leonard blundered. "But I don't understand. You said *the pig* got away?"

Lounging prostrate on the couch, Esther sighed, closed her eyes as if fatigued. "It's part of the Penitence Festival—the pig, I mean. And it got away before the Seventh Night. That's why Solly's going apeshit down there; the Penitation can't officially end until the pig is slaughtered. It's actually kind of funny..." But her words seemed to slip off in some distraction, namely a *tactile* distraction because now, as she lay on the couch, her hands began to very slowly glide up and down her sides in a gesture of self-caressing. "...kind of funny, I mean, because my grandfather's all bent out of shape. To him this is like losing the Advent Wreath on the night before Christmas..." More errant touchings, her hands

moving up and down the outsides of her thighs, then the insides, then up to her bosom. It seemed as though she did this without realizing its inappropriateness. After all, she was a guest, and guests don't generally walk into your living room, flop down on your couch, and begin feeling themselves up. (Well, maybe in California, but not most places.) Now her hands made no secret of cupping her breasts through the harsh black dress-top. "All the offertory celebrations are septenary—seven is the number of God so the Epiphanites acknowledge that number in hopes of being worthy of God. For six days we supplicate and confess, and on the seventh day we slaughter the transitory Host. It's a symbolic oblation to God based on *Leviticus...*"

This sounded fairly interesting but what was taking place on the couch proved even *more* interesting. Fervid fingers unbuttoned the top, pulled it open, and bared large, plush, wobbly breasts. Esther's face looked misted and pink. "Shit, I can't help it," she whispered. "Whenever I get out of that hell-hole I just get...so...hot..."

Leonard received the clear impression that she was not referring to the temperature of the room. Her nipples hardened up to big brown-pink bon-bons, and her breasts proved large enough that she could cup them upward and suckle herself. As she did so, her feet flexed and her legs squirmed on the couch. *Oh, man,* Leonard thought. She alternately sucked each nipple with a fervency that made Leonard wonder if she was trying to get milk. While doing so, she traversed her position slightly and soon her white-socked left foot was sliding up Leonard's leg as he stood watching. Up the

leg, yes, then up to his crotch, where it kneaded him there as deftly as a hand.

Uh-oh...

Now, for the past ten months, Leonard had been consigned to a life of hopelessness and near starvation. Along with that, the only sexual images in his proximity were scenes of two women having sex with animals, and in most cases the animals were more attractive than the two women. Hence, Leonard had always believed his libidinal responses to be dead and buried. Not now, though, not as he watched this robust blond girl-women play with a set of absolutely stellar tits and attempt to jerk him off in his pants with her foot.

She traversed some more, pointing both legs up at him.

"Take my stockings off!" came a hot whisper.

Leonard did so.

"Take your cock out!"

Leonard did that too.

Now her pretty naked feet went to work. She looked up through slit eyes and a carnal grin. One foot settled under his monorchid scrotum, rubbing the testicle within. The other damn foot grabbed his penis like a hand and began to squeeze it. Each squeeze prompted a copious, jewel-like bead of pre-ejaculatory ooze which welled and then depended to the floor like a clear thread.

Leonard's ball constricted, his knees began to quiver, and his mouth went dry. "I, uh, I think I'm going to—"

"Not yet!" she exclaimed. She leaned up in a blur. "Let me have it!" Leonard looked down bulge-eyed as she very attentively jerked him off into her hand. It was an explosive, gushing orgasm which deposited a virtual palmful of sperm into her hand, and a sensation so precise and complete that Leonard collapsed to the floor when she was done. "I need it," she said. Now Leonard was looking up at her face through the V of her parted legs. The ankle dress had slid all the way back to her hips now to reveal her sex and an abundant topping of pubic hair the color of straw. And what she did next was downright impressive.

What in God's name is she—

Leonard needn't finish the thought. She drew her legs all the way back—*all the way*—until her knees were behind her shoulders and the backs of her calves were actually propping up her head! An Epiphanite *and* a contortionist. This feat of course afforded Leonard a most extreme view of her sex: it pushed it out like a fruit tart baked a bit too long, a crack forming to reveal the filling. The face on her craned neck shot him the most wicked of grins, then, as she promptly rubbed that big handful of Leonard's semen into her vaginal opening.

Leonard could not desist from asking: "*What*...are you...*doing?*"

She massaged it in with her fingers, then scraped the rest off as one might scrape remnant icing off a rubber spatula. "I want your come in me," she replied, still grinning at him through the valley of her breasts. "I wanna get pregnant."

"What!" Leonard jolted.

"Solly would go completely nuts if I got knocked up. He'd think one of the congregation did it—the old fucker'd probably have a stroke!"

"I see," Leonard said, though he really didn't.

"Now come here," she said, her grin brighter and even more intent. Her finger curled at him between her legs. "Get me off now," she said. "Put your finger in me."

Leonard crawled forward to the summons and inserted his index finger into the slick wide-open pink blossom. At once the slippery pass gripped him—her vagina was very adroitly sucking his finger!—and then she said more gustily, "Put another finger in..."

In went Leonard's middle finger now, parallel to his index. He drew them in and out with deliberation. It was fascinating, and fascinating too the way the inside of her thighs were covered with fine blond hair. No wax job here, for sure. He stroked her legs with his other hand, reveling at the traceable down-like covering. Sericeous, he guessed the word was. An equally fascinating wisp traveled up to her navel.

"Put the other two in," she breathed.

Oh, well. Leonard complied, as he had always tried to be an accommodating person. But Esther proved even more accommodating—in a different sense, of course—when she next requested: "Put your whole hand in now, and make a fist..."

Leonard's lips sputtered when he exhaled. "My whole *fist?* Won't that hurt?"

"Just do it!"

Leonard did it, even to his own amazement. Esther's sex tightly swallowed his entire fist, churning around it like a spasmodic sac.

"Shove it in and out! Hard!"

Leonard gulped. In and out, then, his arm locomoted. Soon his hand was buried three inches past the wrist.

"Twist your fist around too! Jesus! Don't you know how to fist-fuck?"

"Well, no," Leonard ashamedly admitted. *But I'm learning.* Now his fist plunged back and forth, revolving at the same time. When he looked up, Esther's cheeks billowed. Her face puffed hot-pink, her eyes narrowed to white slivers. Then a series of shrieks accompanied a series of vaginal clenches which hurt Leonard's hand in the process. Then she finished off, a gruff noise belting from her throat "Oh-oh-oh-*ooooooooooooooo! Yeah-shit-fuckin'-A!"*

Leonard guessed that about said it all. When she'd settled down she looked at him through a sated smile and—*pop!*—quickly flexed her pelvic and abdominal muscles to eject Leonard's hand. But Leonard's heart surged when he noticed *her* hands...

"Your hands! My God, what's wrong!"

She unfolded herself to a slouched sitting position, looked at her hands, and frowned. Blood welled up plenteously in each palm, dripping onto the couch, and her feet, too, bled profusely from non-existent wounds.

"Oh, dammit! Happens every time. I get the stigs whenever I come good."

This alarming event didn't seem to bother her in the least. She pulled her stockings back up over her bloody feet, rebuttoned her dress, and wiped her

bloody hands off on her sides.

"Look, I'm really sorry about the mess."

Leonard stared. "That's...quite all right."

"I mean, I'll clean it up. Where's the kitchen? I'll get some wet rags."

"No no no no no," Leonard replied at bit too hastily. *Your grandfather's pig is in the kitchen, and it's dead. Two drug addicts beat it to death because it ate their heroin, but that's...another story.* "I'll get it cleaned up in a jiff," he said instead.

She got up and he escorted her to the door. "I better get back now before they get wise." Then she kissed Leonard right on the lips, inadvertently smearing blood on his Van der Graaf Generator shirt. "You're a nice guy...and a great fist fucker!"

"Uh, thanks," Leonard responded to the compliment.

She smiled sheepishly as she retied her white bonnet, badging it with blood.

"Isn't, uh, isn't your grandfather going to be mad?"

"Mad about what?" she asked.

"Well, uh, you've got blood all over yourself."

"Oh, that? Naw, he'll think I had a visitation." She kissed him briefly once more, then laughed. "I'll tell him I got fucked by a seraph! 'Bye!"

She scurried out into the night and disappeared almost as if on wings.

Almost like a seraph.

«««—»»»

Leonard didn't even bother trying to clean up the blood. It's not like it was a big deal. *If she thought this little bit of blood was a mess, she should see the back rooms.* The event of his bizarre sexual encounter with Esther—not to mention her sequent evidence of stigmata—was quickly brushed aside by Leonard's attention. He had something far more important to tend to right now, didn't he?

The pig lay as he'd left it: dead on the kitchen floor. This came now as a curious note in itself. He even wondered why he hadn't questioned it beforehand. On every occasion in the past, whenever Rocco brought up a farm animal for a movie, the animal was transported from New Jersey in one of those two-wheeled animal trailers connected to a ball-hitch on the back of the Deville. Yet the pig, Leonard knew, was brought in the back seat, and it never occurred to him how unlikely it would be that two mafiosoes would drive *all the way* from Trenton with a *pig* in the back seat. Of course not—they'd merely stolen the pig from the nearby religious settlement, knowing previously that said settlement raised pigs. So how angry could Rocco be when he learned that the pig was dead? *It's not* his *pig*. Be that as it may, he still had to dispose of the animal; true it only died an hour ago, but by Friday? He couldn't have it rotting there on the floor. *Gotta bury it*, came Leonard's first decision. *Gotta bury Arnold.* But before he even thought to lean over and drag it outside—

"Wait a minute!"

The facts reeled like a list in his mind.

1) I'm starving.

2) The girls are starving.

3) And we've essentially been *starving for months.*

4) Rocco never brings enough food.

5) The only food we have in the house now is dog *food.*

But...

6) Right now I'm looking at a perfectly good cornfed pig!

7) I must be STUPID!

Indeed. Why eat dog food when he had 150 pounds of USDA-choice pork right here at his feet?

Leonard got a knife. Leonard got the ax out of the tool shed. Leonard hefted the pig up onto the kitchen table. Leonard turned on the oven.

Then Leonard began to cut.

«««—»»»

It took all night but the night seemed to zip by with Leonard now in a role as The Happy Butcher. He had watched his father rend pigs countless times, and had helped out just as many. Arnold was skinned lickety-split with a sharp knife, and the "gutpile" was just as easily—though quite a bit more malodorously—removed and discarded into a previously excavated hole in the back yard. The hooves and, alas, Arnold's head were quick to follow. Certainly wielding a wood-chopping ax in place of typical bandsaws presented some difficulty, but Leonard found that the make-shift implement sufficed just fine. He did most of the quartering out on the back patio behind the hedges; the dogs watched him with keen interest, and Leonard, now the generous meat-supplier, tossed them raw scraps for which their

enthusiasm was plain. Next, he retreated back inside and trimmed the pig's parts of excess fat. The exemplary hams, flanks, shanks, and shoulders were dropped into a great bucket of salted water where they would be left for several days to cure. The rest was trimmed and parted further and stowed in the refrigerator. Purveying the bacon was the hardest part as this entailed meticulous trimming of the muscle-meat covering the ribs and appropriately slicing the area of flesh that connected this—namely, the abdominal wall. As Leonard commenced with this very critical task—he *really* liked bacon—he'd previously placed one large, choice loin section, or "eyecut," into the oven, sprinkled it with salt and chopped wild onions from the yard, then hooded it with foil and baked it at 350 degrees for an hour and a half.

He paced the kitchen, wringing his hands. In no time the house's fetor of blood, excrement, vomitus, and horror was overwhelmed by an aroma that could only be described as heaven-sent. This caused Leonard to salivate to the extent of outright drooling. And when dinnertime arrived, Leonard audibly giggled aloud, and when he pulled that sizzling loin out of the oven and set it on the table, he got an erection as turgid as if Esther the tainted Epiphanite were soliciting his sex drive with her feet.

He ate the entire loin, and some time later sat back exhausted, gorged, and grinning.

«««—»»»

He dreamed he was standing on a decorated stage before a cheering audience of at least a thousand strong. A man in a tux who looked like Bob

Barker before he became absolutely ancient held a shining golden trophy in one hand and a microphone in the other, and his amplified voice boomed out: "And now, in the category of Best First Film, the winner is...*The Confessor* by Leonard D'arava!" Leonard wept standing up, his heart and soul and spirit blooming. Esther the Epiphanite was there cheering him on, and so were Sissy and Snowdrop—naked, of course—and the hostess from the Widow's Walk, and Leonard's dead father, and Rocco and Knuckles, and even George from D Block. "Yaaaaay!" Esther squealed, blood pouring forth from her outstretched hands. "Good goin', kid," Rocco said. "I'm proud of you, son," his father said. "Ah'll beat myseff off wiff my hand affa I woke yo' ass," George said. The applause rocked the awards hall. Balloons dropped en masse from the vast dome ceiling, and then came the *pop-pop-pop-pop!* of the press and their cannonade of flashbulbs. Leonard basked in it all. *This is for me, all for me!* came the incredulous thought. *All these people are cheering...for ME!* Then the Bob Barker clone turned, veering a dentured grin, and that's when the slow-mo began. Inch by inch, step by step 48 frames-per-second step, Leonard traversed the stage. His smile felt like his entire face, and slower still time seemed to lapse when Bob Barker extended the glimmering trophy toward the winner. Leonard's own hand reached out and grabbed it. It felt warm, brilliant, and somehow shimmering with energy, and once it was securely in his grasp, Leonard truly realized that this was his golden hour and the event which would spell the first day of a career marked with the acclaim he deserved. It was euphoria and triumph that flowed in his veins now, not mere blood. Leonard, indeed, was the Winner!

There was but one oddity, well two, actually. When he reached out to claim the prize, the hand which took it could not have been his own. It was a broad, firm, strong hand, like a lumberer's or a mason's. Leonard had skinny pasty geek hands in real life, but that was okay, this was a dream, and it was the best dream of his life, and he certainly wasn't going to spoil its glow by questioning the morphology of his fucking hands.

But there was something else, too, even more queer.

The hands were green.

«««—»»»

"Coooooooooooooome annnnnnnnnnnnnd *get* it!"

Leonard clanged the "meal chime" with a barbecue fork, the metal kitchen table leg having to suffice for the bell. Leonard felt unbelievably refreshed; in fact, he couldn't remember when he'd felt this good. First, the satisfying—if not a trifle odd—orgasm with Esther, then a bellyful of choice pork loin, and then, to top it all off, a *wonderful* dream. (Well, except for the green hands. Leonard, something of a symbolist, tried to apply a meaning to the rot-green hands of the otherwise perfect dream but could come up with nothing. But...so what? Dreams could be stupid sometimes!) Bacon sizzled delectably on the skillet. Eggs and biscuits would've been the perfect accompaniment but, well, you can't have everything. He fairly loped through the house to Sissy and Snowdrop's room, stuck his head in, and announced quite loudly: "Rise and shine, girls! Another day of beauty and wonder has dawned!"

A few guttural murmurs, and the blanched figures on the box spring twisted around. Leonard jerked open the fly-specked curtains. "Good morning sunshine!"

"Ugh! Fuck *you!*" Snowdrop returned Leonard's cheerful greeting.

Sissy squinted up, shielding her eyes. She opened her mouth to say something but suddenly hitched and hiccupped a few belts of bile onto the floor.

"Come on, up, up, up and at 'em!"

"I need junk," Sissy croaked.

"I gotta take a bang bad, Leonard!" Snowdrop added.

"Gimme gimme!"

"All the heroin's gone," Leonard pointed out, his good humor unassailed. "You two chipmunks used it up last night, but—hark! I've got something better!"

That poked some life into them. They scrabbled up, shuffling after Leonard as he breezed back to the kitchen.

"What'cha got! What'cha got!" Sissy insisted.

"Maybe he's got some coke!" Snowdrop thrilled.

"Or some crystal meth!"

"Nope," Leonard proclaimed when they stopped in the kitchen entry. "I've got something better than any of that." He extended his hand to the table. "Food! *Real* food!"

"Ugh! Fuck you!" Snowdrop spat.

Sissy pouted, her tiny fists clenched at her sides, her sucked-dry face full of indignation. "You DICK! What are we going to do what that shit?"

Leonard smirked. He was not generally prone to anger. On the table sat a virtual *pile* of hot, crisp bacon; Leonard had fried up an entire slab. He would've thought they'd be more grateful than this. "You're going to *eat* it," he answered. "Last night while you girls were shooting heroin I was in here butchering the pig and slaving over a hot stove."

Sissy continued with her rant. "I ain't eatin' that shit! I want junk!"

"Yeah!" Snowdrop again. They were ganging up on him. "Get us more junk, you pussy!"

Leonard realized full well that he was no macho man. He was a nice guy all in all, and he'd always tried to be. He'd always been taught to treat others as he would want to be treated himself. But in this day and age? All a "nice guy" was was a sucker, a pushover.

"I wouldn't eat this shit with a dog's mouth, you skinny wimp motherfucker!" Snowdrop yelled.

"Fuck yeah!" Sissy blurted. "If I eat this shit, I'll chuck it all up in your wimp face! Now get us some junk, you dick!"

"You got more, we know you do!"

"Give it to us! Or we'll kill your skinny ass just like we did that fuckin' pig!"

Something quite out of character happened then. Leonard's Happy Country Kitchen—in an amount of time that it takes one to snap his or her fingers—turned into...a Charnel House.

Leonard rammed his fist into Sissy's cheek so hard all of the rotten teeth flew out of her mouth.

"I've been a nice guy too long."

Leonard punched Snowdrop in the face even harder, so hard in fact that her right eyeball fell out of its socket where it hung to her cheek by a cord.

"Won't eat my fresh, home-cooked bacon with a dog's mouth, huh?"

Sissy was on the floor now, on hands and knees. Ropes of blood hung from her mouth. Leonard stepped on her back and stomped down hard. The impact of her abdomen to the floor caused a spurtle of bile to jet from her mouth. Her spine cracked in the process.

"Skinny wimp motherfucker, huh?"

"No Leonard no!" Snowdrop pleaded, backing up with her dirty palms showing. Her right eyeball bobbed on her cheek.

"Yes Leonard yes," Leonard replied and approached her. From the cutting room he could hear the radio, and it seemed delightfully appropriate: Iggy Pop groaning "All aboard for funtime..." Leonard grabbed Snowdrop's skinny neck and squeezed. He squeezed so hard she couldn't even gag. Her face turned pink, then blue, then something close to black. From her eye socket, blood poured. Leonard curiously stuck a finger in there, heard a thin bone crack, then he wriggled his finger in her brain. She was clearly quite dead, yet he held her up off her feet for some time. Her tongue—fat now in its post-mortal edema—stuck out comically from between her pressed lips. Leonard leaned forward as if to kiss her. But he didn't kiss her. He clamped his teeth on her fat tongue, bit if off, and—

"*Pluuuuey!*"

—spat in back into her face.

While this was going on, by the way, Leonard was only seeing red, so to speak. He did not calculate the motivation for his deeds, nor did it occur to

him that what he was doing to these poor, unfortunate drug addicts totally defied the sense of morality and good will he tried to live his life by. Equally, he did not question the oddity of newfound strength and the vigor of several serial-killers all rolled up into one. Instead, he just kept tearing ass. He revolved Snowdrop's head round and round and round until her neck looked like a pale cinnamon twist. Eventually it detached and fell into his lap. He pulled the depending eye away, severing the optical cord, and then picked up the bitten off tongue and inserted it into the socket. Now she was sticking her tongue out at him through her eye! It was a neat effect. He calmly carried the headless body out back and—"Soup's on, doggies!"—threw it into the dog pen. The dogs barked in jumping, saliva-flying glee, and they ate with voracity.

When he meandered back into the house—whistling "Domino" by the Cramps—he found that Sissy had managed to crawl most of the way to the front door, dragging her dead legs behind her.

"Why you little dickens!"

She shot out a shriek, then hastened her progress, thumping forward ever faster on her palms. *Thump-thump-thump-thump...* It was quite a measure of determination. "And just where do you think you're going, Miss Priss?" Leonard coyly asked. "Want to go for a stroll outside? Here, let me help you." He opened the front door and gestured to the bright sunlit yard with his hand. She cast one terrified glance up at his grinning face, shrieked again, then just kept thumping. "You know," he said, "it troubles me to see a woman in extreme travail. And I think I can relieve some of your burden!"

Leonard dashed off only to return a moment later with the big wood-chopping ax. "Let's get rid of some of that dead weight, huh?"

THUNK! THUNK! THUNK!

Three swipes was all it took to cut her body in half. Amazingly, if only for a moment, Sissy seemed to not recognize this, and the front half of her body thumped even more quickly forward, leaving a wake of scrawny innards and blood. Leonard watched in revel as everything from the waist up dragged itself out the front door, where it stalled and then died a moment later. Everything from the waist down, of course, remained in the living room: two skinny legs joined to a skinny buttocks.

Leonard flipped the legs and ass over. To his surprise, he discovered that all this killing and mayhem had made him horny, so, as if to conform to this new and sudden change in his personality, Leonard—

"Oh, what the hell?"

—pulled his pants down and had sex with the lower half of Sissy's body.

He fucked the legs with gusto, now singing "Ain't no cure for the summertime blues," the version by the Flying Lizards, naturally. He came quickly, and it was a "good nut," as Rocco would say, and when Leonard was finished dispensing it, he went back to the kitchen and finished the bacon. But as he reached for the first piece he did notice this:

His hand was green.

«««—»»»

Leonard awoke to the pulsating thrum of crickets. He leaned up from the kitchen table, rubbed his face, and thought, *Oh, man. What a horrible dream!* Yet the first thing he saw after that thought was Snowdrop's severed head, her tongue sticking out at him from her eye.

Something was amiss.

A quick, stunned walk about the premises showed him what he already knew. Snowdrop's gnawed skeleton glistened within the dog pen, several very fat dogs sleeping aside. Sissy's legs and ass lay splayed on the living room floor, a giant wet spot on the carpet between them, while the rest of her lay several feet beyond the front door. Leonard closed the door.

"Ooops," Leonard voiced to himself.

What had happened? What had gotten into him, and moreover...*why?* The evidence about the house indicated something clearly more acute than a bad mood.

And when he looked at his hands, they were, indeed, green.

His arms were green, and when he pulled up his Van der Graaf shirt, he couldn't help but notice that his chest and stomach were green too.

Kind of like the color of snowpea pods, if a bit darker. Then came the inevitable moment of truth. He pulled down his pants...

"Oh, *man!* Even my *dick* is green!"

The fungus- and vomit-specked bathroom mirror sealed the total package into reality. Leonard stared cockeyed at his green face. Something had turned him homicidal *and* green.

A few seconds of cogitation...

Then he had a pretty good idea what it was.

«««—»»»

Beneath the shroud of midnight, he slipped like a sprite down the hill. Crickets and peepers pulsed their waves of music into the night. A sickle moon followed Leonard through a declivity of waist-high rye grass and man-tall sunflowers. Leonard's sprint through the wild consumed at least several miles, his feet blazing a trail, and then he'd arrived.

The "compound."

The Epiphanite settlement.

Stark rectangles filled the expansive perimeter of 10-foot-tall chainlink fence: one squat building after another. Leonard scrabbled over the fence with no difficulty, then dashed behind a stack of hand-made barrels. She was in there somewhere—Esther the Contortionist, but— *How am I going to find her without alerting the entire compound?* What, he was just going to barge into every building—a skinny green man in a Van der Graaf shirt—and say *Excuse me, but I'm looking for Esther, you know that girl who can pin her feet back behind her head?* Not likely. He'd have a dozen guys who looked like Ernest Borgnine chasing his ass with pitchforks.

But what could he do? It seemed hopeless!

"Yooooooow!" his shriek cut into the night when a hand grabbed his shoulder.

"Shhhhhh!"

Leonard turned wide-eyed and looked straight into the pretty face of...good luck.

"Be *quiet!"* Esther urged in a fierce whisper. "You'll wake everyone up!"

Leonard let his heart pace down, then considered this remarkable stroke of fine fortune. Not only had Esther found *him*, it was too dark out here for her to notice the incongruenty that his skin was green...

"What are you *doing* in here?" she complained. "Are you nuts?"

"I, uh—I was looking for you."

"Well I was looking for *you."* Her face blushed slightly in the moonlight. "I just snuck out and was gonna come up to your house."

"Why?"

She rolled her eyes. "To fuck you, you dummy. I told you last night I want you to knock me up."

For whatever reason, the words which composed this prurient statement put a spark something fierce in Leonard's loins. At once his green dick was hard and throbbing in his pants, and the wash of lust completely side-tracked him as to his purpose. He roughly grabbed her there behind the barrels, licking her neck, pawing at her coarse black pilgrim's dress.

"Not *here!"* she contested but spared a giggle. "Someone on rounds would see us." Leonard rubbed his erection against her hip. "Mmm, you really *do* want to see me," she observed. "But we can't fuck here, we have to go to your—"

An idea cut off the rest of her words, and a slow smile bloomed on her face. "Wait a minute, wait a minute—this is great!"

"What is?" Leonard asked, now trying to stick his hand up her dress. "You want to go back to the house?"

"Nope, I've got a better idea! Come on!"

She grabbed his hand and jerked. Anxiousness led him quickly through the maze of stark, squat buildings; she'd stop every so often to peer around a corner for sentinels, then led him further until they arrived at a smaller building near the far end of the compound. "Here's where the girls sleep," she whispered. "Buddy, I hope you're horny." Her hand molested his groin. "Holy shit, you're horny, all right!"

Indeed, Leonard was, hornier than he'd ever been in his life, and raring to go. Yet his distraction let go of him long enough to notice, beyond the fence, a moderate pig pen filled with sleeping hogs, and beyond that, some horses and sheep grazing in the fields. A high cloud moved off, and suddenly Leonard's face was bathed in moonlight.

"Are you all right?" Esther asked with a sudden curiosity.

"Uh, yeah."

She squinted. "You look kind of...dark."

Leonard frowned to himself. "We need to talk."

«««—»»»

But the talk would come later as Leonard's "distraction" returned once Esther showed him into the girl's dorm. Five spartan cots sat in a row, and four of them contained girls in their late teens, donned in sackcloth nightgowns and fast asleep. Esther glided through the dark and nudged each one of them awake, whispering the likes of: "Shhh! Don't make any noise," "Keep the oil lamps out!" "I brought a man back!"

"A *man!"* one of the girl exclaimed.

"*SHHHHH!"*

The girls sat up now, their eyes focused on Leonard's silhouette in the dark. "This is Leonard," Esther explained, "he lives up in that funny house on the hill and he's going to fuck us all!"

Wow, Leonard thought.

A rush of giggles and gleeful squeals rose up as all of the girls peeled off their austere gowns and converged on him. The darkness, thankfully, continued to conceal Leonard's greenness, but by their vim and vigor, he suspected that he could've been pin-striped and covered with pink elephants and these girls wouldn't have cared. They mauled him, stripping him as though he were a candy bar and his clothes were the wrapper. "Goddamn, this guy's got a big motherfuckin' cock!" one girl celebrated when she grabbed him.

Who? Me? Leonard thought.

Hot hands coursed over his body.

"What a fuckin' *rock-hard bod!"*

"Jesus Christ, this guy's a rack of *muscle!"*

Huh-huh-huh—who? Me?

But bacchanal lust pushed these oddities away in short order. Leonard was sucked like a lollipop and fucked like a whore. He merely lay back on the dirt floor and let these feisty gals do their thing, taking turns sitting on him. And it astounded him, the severity of language eloquented by such cloistered, Christian women. "Ooo! This fucker's cock is splitting my pussy wide open! Feels like it's gonna come out my mouth!" "Shoot a big giant wad in me, you fuck-machine! Knock me the fuck UP!" "Goddamn! He's

coming in me like a fuckin' *hose!"* "Holy goddamn *shit,* Esther! I didn't know guys *had* cocks this fuckin' big!"

Who? Me? Leonard thought.

They fucked him there in the dirt for a good hour, sweating on him, drooling on him, and fucking him some more. And he gave it up each time with quite a bit of charity, firing repeated hot rockets of sperm deep into every vaginal pass that saw fit to encompass his manhood. For some reason, though, he did not question this seemingly impossible feat of sexual prowess. There was no period of erectile refraction, for instance: each time Leonard deposited his reproductive goods, his penis didn't even lose its turgidity. It simply stayed hard and kept belting out the semen like a turkey baster with an unlimited reservoir. An hour later his four charges lay giggling and exhausted about him, while Leonard just lay there with his hands behind his head and his unwavering erection sticking up.

"One more wad for me," Esther said, and now she was sitting on him. "Are you sure you're the same guy I was with last night?"

She squealed high as a metal whistle when Leonard thrust a hard one up into her. "I, uh, I think so," he said.

But that was all the talk Esther was good for. Her sex gulped every impossible inch of him, and then, for posterity, he turned her around in the dirt, pinned her feet back behind her ears, and then *really* gave her a pumping. Soon she was orgasming so abundantly that all she could do was jibber, her sex clenching in spasms like a myocardial infarction. When Leonard discerned that she'd had enough, he released one last ejaculation

into the womanly confines—or, not quite as eloquently, dumped a giant fuck right in her hole.

He looked down at her in the moonlight coursing through the high, tiny windows. Her head lolled, showing an idiot grin with a tongue sticking out, and all she could do was murmur and blow spit bubbles as most of that giant fuck ran warmly out of her sex.

But now that his needs had been properly slaked, Leonard's attentions returned to the matters at hand. After all, he hadn't come down here to ball the ever-living tar out of a bunch of Epiphanites. He'd come to seek answers to the queries that were now piling up to mountain size. *I am not myself*, he thought. *There is something seriously wrong with me, and I have to find out what it is.*

"Come on, come on," he insisted. He hauled Esther naked up off the floor. She felt rubber-boned. "We have to find someplace to talk."

"Back here," she eventually agreed. "The wash room."

He followed her to said room, which was just as dark. "Let me light a lamp," she said.

"No, wait! Not yet," Leonard hurried. "I need to talk to you first."

She slumped in the dark. "All right, what about?"

Leonard swallowed. "About the...the pig."

"Whuh—oh, you mean the—"

Leonard impatiently cut her off. "Look, last night you said something about some 7-day religious celebration or something—"

"Yeah, the Penitence Festival."

"And something about your grandfather and the rest of the congregation being overly concerned because—"

"Because the pig escaped," she said.

"Well, I need to know about that pig."

"*Huh?*"

Leonard took a breath and began, "I'll give you the short version. The pig didn't escape. My...employers came down here last week and stole it."

Esther gaped incredulous in the moon-tinsled dark. "Are you kidding?"

"No. I'm not. For a number of days, and for reasons I'd prefer not to explain, your grandfather's pig was in our house. And by a matter of complicated happenstance, the pig...died. My employers aren't very diligent about providing an adequate ration of food, and I was near starving, so...I slaughtered your grandfather's pig and cooked it. And I ate some of it."

Her wide eyes held on the preposterous revelation he'd just made. And then—she burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

Leonard was appalled. "What's so funny?"

"You-you-you *ate* the Emblem of the Sacrifant!"

"*What?*"

She had to sit on the wash basin she was laughing so hard. "The Penitence Festival is a symbolic ritual—it's called a *transpositional rite.* For six days we pray in silence for God to purge us of our sins and to *banish* those sins."

"I don't get it," Leonard said.

"When the sins are banished, they have to go somewhere, right?"

"Well...I suppose so."

"So we ask God to banish them into the Penitation Host, which we also call the Sacrifant."

"I still don't get it," Leonard communicated, trying hard not to bellow.

"The pig, you doe-doe! We transpose our sins into the physical body of the pig!" She crumbled, slapping her bare knees and giving over to more ludicrous hitches of laughter. "And you-you-you...*ate* it!"

Leonard smirked. "You're telling me that I *ate* all the sins of the Epiphanites?"

"Well, no, not just the Epiphanites. The sins of the whole world."

Interesting but...Leonard didn't believe in the supernatural, nor the mystic. It was just a pig, wasn't it?

"This stuff's not really true, is it? I mean, it's just, like, a *symbol*, right?"

Esther continued to wheeze laughter. "Sure, I guess."

"Then what's so damn funny!"

She had to talk in stops, catching her breath. "It's just that you've completely ruined the Penitation! And-and-and...Solly doesn't even *know* it! Oh, man, holy shit, this is great! He thinks the pig's out running around in the woods somewhere. But it's really in your stomach!"

Leonard was getting irked. "All right, so what's the big deal? I ate the pig. What's the difference between me eating it and someone else eating it? Didn't you say you were going to slaughter it yourselves at the end of the festival?"

"Yes, yes!" she guffawed. "But not to *eat.* The meat is considered *unholy!* It's the worldly vessel of sin! You're not supposed to eat it, you're supposed to burn it and bury it—purge it from physical existence!"

Leonard failed to see the humor in any of this. "Just tell me. Was there anything wrong with the pig? Like, was it diseased or anything like that?"

"Well, no. It was just a normal pig."

Leonard nodded snidely. "Yeah? Well yesterday I was a normal *guy.* But since I ate some of that pig I've noticed...changes about myself."

Esther's fluttering laughter stopped cold. "What kind of changes?" she asked in a voice that suddenly rang very serious.

"Well, I've noticed some changes in my, uh, behavior." *You got that right, Leonard,* he told himself in sarcasm. *I pulled a heroin addict's head off with my bare hands, stuck her tongue in her eye, and threw her body to the dogs. And there was another heroin addict there too, and I cut her body in half at the waist and then had sex with the bottom half. Would you consider that a change in normal behavior?*

Instead, Leonard kept it simple. "I've become moody, hot-tempered, impatient, you know. And one more thing. I mean I thought maybe it's an allergy or something but—"

"But what!"

A pause. A raise of the brow. Then he had out with it.

"I turned green."

The silence which followed troubled him. "Let me get a lamp lit," he heard Esther mutter in the darkness. There was some faint clatter, then a match flared. She lit the wick of a globed oil lamp and turned up the light.

Then she put that light on Leonard.

"I hate to tell you this," she admitted after a long hard gander. "But you haven't *just* turned green."

"What are you talking about?" the dark question flowed from his throat. And the answer was just as dark.

"You've turned into a fuckin' demon," she said.

«««—»»»

The moments—and then the hours—that followed seemed to wilt together as intertwining strands of nightmare. Horror folded over into self-revelation which then folded over into more horror until it was all the same thing. No doubt this change—this *transposition*—ensued as a progressive event. Earlier at the house, he was just green but when Esther shined that lamplight on him and he looked down at himself, he easily noted that he had become far more than just green. He'd grown bigger, huskier, hairier. His former spindly-form film-school-geek body had mammothed out into a sinuous carriage of terrifying musculature. Rippled pecs sculpted his upper torso; his belly looked runneled, and his shoulders tapered down to a V of butterflied latissimus dorsi and venosity. Nails like sharpened pitons stuck out of his fingers, and he now stood on feet that were huge, splayed, and webbed. Before all human reason left him, he of course looked down at his genitals and gasped. On a good day Leonard could pull a six-inch hard one, but what now hung between his legs had to be ten inches flaccid: a fat, slightly curled tube of sexual sausage with a snout of foreskin hanging off the end. Er, a snout of *green* foreskin, that is. He remembered thinking, *That's not my dick! Where did this whopper come from!* He also remembered grabbing it, shaking it in disbelief like a slab of raw steak. And

the previously walnut-sized testicle occupying his scrotum now hung down in its fleshy sac, about the size of a baseball.

He thanked God she didn't have a mirror, for what must his face look like? He didn't want to see, but then he didn't really have to because a forbidden instinct urged him to slowly raise his gargantuan hands and touch his forehead, where he felt two protruding horns.

Sometime thereafter, he ran screaming out of the dorm, running, running —yes, but to where he had no idea. He just ran and ran, quite aimlessly, pounding through the woods and overgrown fields, thinking, *I'm a fuckin' demon! I'm a fuckin' demon! What the hell am I gonna do now?*

«««—»»»

A little more than a week later, a man named Nicholas Rosetti arrived at the house in a Lincoln Fleetwood. His nickname, however, was Bam-Bam, and for sound reason. At 6-foot-8 and tipping 290, he was employed as the security chief and first bodyguard for one Paul Monstroni Vinchetti, aka Vinchetti "The Eye," a big district boss in the Lonna/Stello/Marconi Crime Pyramid. And the first thing Bam-Bam noticed when he parked the Fleetwood in front of the house was—

"The *fuck?"*

—half of a dead naked woman. Bam-Bam shucked his big Webley .455 and cocked its receiver. If half a dead gal in the front yard wasn't a sign of trouble, then Bam-Bam didn't know what was. It was not a particularly distressing sight to Bam-Bam, as he had cut a fair number of folks in half

during his tenure as a crew lieutenant. He'd also cut off heads, noses, ears, lips, fingers, toes, arms, legs, genitalia, etc. It might even be suggested that Bam-Bam had at one time or another cut off everything that *could* be cut off of the human physique, and he rather enjoyed it. Nevertheless, he drew his gun out of prudence. Whoever cut the skinny broad in half might still be inside.

He found the other half of the skinny broad in the living room. Just skinny legs and ass, going to rot. And between those two legs, stained into the shabby carpet, was a great big flaky splotch of dried jism. *Looks like this bitch got it the hard way,* Bam-Bam mused. No doubt she was one of Rocco's flick junkies, and there should be another one up here too, along with some college kid they pinched to make the flicks. Judging by the physical state of the skinny broad, though, Bam-Bam deduced that finding anyone else alive in here offered up a very low order of probability. He found the second chick's head sitting on the kitchen table, a half-rotten tongue sticking out of her eye. Dog barking exploded at him when he went outside: several starving mutts charging the fence at Bam-Bam's appearance. They were trying to bite their way out, as they clearly had not eaten in a while. Their last meal was in evidence, though—a headless skeleton. Bam-Bam calmly shot the dogs with the big Webley and searched on.

What miffed him most, however, was Rocco and Knuckles. They'd been missing for days now. They were supposed to zip up here and pick up a master reel and get right back to Trenton but that was a no-go. *Maybe they booked on Vinch,* he supposed. Not a wise thing to do but Bam-Bam could

think of no other possibility since their Deville was nowhere to be seen. This college kid who made the flicks wasn't to be seen either, and that made Bam-Bam wonder.

Back in the house, his size-14 shoes thunked down the hall. The confines of the house, by the way, brought a ghastly death-stench but this did not bother Bam-Bam either. He'd smelled worse things, like the time they sealed a CI alive into a 150-gallon drum and let it sit in the sun for a couple of weeks. But goddamn Vinch wanted to see it so Bam-Bam had pried that can open and showed the boss the job. Vinchetti had doubled over and puked at the stench, while Bam-Bam merely took a deep breath and sort of chuckled to himself. Shit, split floaters and gut jobs smelled worse than this. It was no big deal.

The big deal was in the ready room.

"Uh-oh," Bam-Bam intoned.

Knuckles severed head looked right back at Bam-Bam from where it had been placed on a fold-down chair. *Now that's what I call a dickface*, Bam-Bam associated. Knuckles' penis was sticking out of his mouth like a tongue. The big body lay on the work table, and it looked liked somebody had tried to debone it. But who? Rocco?

No. Not Rocco. When Bam-Bam turned his big head and looked on the other side of the room, there lay Rocco cut in half just like the chick outside. Looked like a whole bunch of dog food had been crammed in his mouth, for several empty cans of Giant-brand *Big Chunk Beef Dinner* lay in the corner. Bam-Bam didn't get it. But somebody'd also done a Sicilian Necktie on the poor bastard. Oh, and his dick had been nailed to the wall.

But then Bam-Bam looked more closely at Rocco's lower half. Just two legs connected to an ass, just like the chick. *Holy smokes,* Bam-Bam thought. *This is some work.* Rocco's asshole gaped wide, as big around as a soda can. Somebody stuck something *big* up there...

Bam-Bam walked back out to the car, utilizing his limited sense of deductive reasoning. The two chicks were dead. Rocco and Knuckles were dead. That only left...

The kid?

Bam-Bam got in the Fleetwood and dialed up his boss, (they had car phones in 1977 but generally only rich people had them). "Yeah, Mr. Vinchetti? This is Bam-Bam. I'm up at the house now and, well, sir, it's pretty fucked up."

"The fuck you talkin' about?" Paul Monstroni Vinchetti replied over the line. He was eating while he talked, probably Calamari Marinara—his favorite—washed down with a couple of Peroni beers. "You find Rocco?"

"Uh, yes, sir, Mr. Vinchetti, I found R—"

"Put that dago bastard on the phone right now."

Bam-Bam grit his teeth. "That ain't too possible, sir, 'cos, see, he's dead and so's Knuckles. Somebody did the job on the both of 'em, and the junkies too."

"The *fuck?"*

"Yes sir. I mean, this was a *job,* Mr. Vinchetti. Remember the job me and Dapper did on Linwood when we caught him skimmin' the books? We—"

"Yeah, yeah, I remember. You psychos made him watch while you trash-compacted his baby and pulled his wife's guts out her ass with a pair'a

welder's tongs."

"Yeah, boss, and then we kidney-shanked him. But, shit, *this* job? This job *here?* Makes Linwood look like kids playin' in a sandbox."

A *long* pause. "The fuck happened up there?"

"Knuckle's head's cut off with his dick stickin' out his mouth, and Rocco's necktied and chopped in half. Found his cock and balls nailed to the wall like a Home Sweet Home plaque, and somebody stuck something *really big* up his ass, boss, 'cos his asshole's stretched open wide enough that you can see the inside of his fuckin' colon, sir. And the two junkies are all fucked up too, bigtime, Mr. Vinchetti. One's head's sittin' on the kitchen table and her body throwed to the dogs and the other one's cut in half just like Rocco, top half outside on the front porch, bottom half in the living room, and it looks like somebody fucked the bottom half, boss, 'cos there's a bunch'a dried jizz on the carpet between the legs."

"God-*DAMN*, Bam-Bam!"

"And then there's the kid—"

"What they do to him?"

"Well nothin' that I can see, boss, 'cos he ain't here and neither is the Deville, so I figure it's the kid who done the whole job and split."

A bewildered pause. "What, that fuckin' skinny Leonard kid who shoots the animal flicks? You're tellin' me a fuckin' pencil-neck film school geek pulled a psycho-job on two'a my soldiers? You're tellin' me this *candyass* cut Knuckles' *head off* and stuck his *dick* in his mouth?"

Bam-Bam shrugged. "I don't see no other explanation, Mr. Vinchetti, 'cos like I said the kid ain't here and neither is Rocco's Caddy."

"Fuck!" the Mob Boss spat. "That kid made *great* animal flicks and now I gotta start the works all over again someplace else. Maybe we got made, maybe it was the Bracca Family or the Leone's did a hit on us. Or maybe those Lavender Hill homos out in fuckin' fruitland California. Those cocksuckers always pull psycho jobs and they been tryin' to tear a piece of my porno action for years."

"Maybe so, boss, but my guess is—"

"Shaddap and lemme think." A few more bites of sauteed squid. "All right, look Bam-Bam, what I want you to do I want you to go back in and torch the fuckin' place, then get out of there. We'll use one of our places upstate for the flicks. Torch the whole motherfucker good—like you did on that kindergarten back in '65—then get back here."

"You got it, Mr. Vinchetti."

Bam-Bam rang off and went back into the house. Torch jobs were easy when you cross-vented the place right, and the gas stove would really add some oomp-pah. It was always more fun, though, when there were people alive in the joint, like that kindergarten back in '65. Bam-Bam didn't hesitate to turn 16 toddlers and a teacher to charcoal 'cos one of the kids was the grandson of a federal judge who was stepping on Vinchetti. But that motherfucker stopped stepping right after that 'cos he had two more grandkids not to mention a wife and a fuckin' daughter. Bam-Bam wished he'd gotten orders to do the daughter 'cos she was a looker and he liked to take 'em down slow but, shit, it never happened. The judge laid off.

He walked around inside again, had another look-over, opening the doors and windows. One thing was really fucked up but Bam-Bam, not one to pay

a whole lot of attention to detail, never really noticed it.

There were a couple bloody footprints in the ready room, only the footprints...

Well, they weren't fuckin' human.

Bam-Bam was about to yank the stove away from the wall, and here was a detail he couldn't *help* but notice. The stove was warm. All the burners were off but the oven dial had been left on the WARM setting, and come to think of it—in all that palpable stench of atrocity which hung in the house—he thought he smelled something pretty good, like breakfast.

"Fuckin'-A," he remarked when he opened the oven. His breadbasket rumbled instantaneously. There in a big pan lay a full rack of mouth-watering baby-back ribs and a pile of motherfuckin' bacon that looked just great, and since Bam-Bam possessed an appetite bigger than his fuckin' suit size, he didn't see no harm in scarfing some of this primo grub before he burned the house down.

««—»»

Meanwhile, a gray 1967 Cadillac Deville drove a steady 55 miles per hour down Route 795 just out of New York. The driver was very prudent; he did not want to be stopped by the police.

Riding with him were his five new wives—that is five girls in their late teens, all wearing white bonnets tied under their chins and severe black ankle dresses. All five of them were pregnant though none of them knew this yet.

The driver knew, though.

The driver knew a lot of things now.

He knew, for instance, that his peculiar appearance would preclude him from any interaction with the human race. He belonged to *another* race now, and he would live accordingly. When they needed gas, one of the girls would get it. When they needed food—the same. Inconveniences would be rife, but they would be minor, and the driver knew that a wondrous future awaited them all. They would find a place to start their new lives, and they would live off the land, and they would be fruitful and multiply.

It would be glorious!

What the driver didn't know was that in the Cadillac's trunk was the most recent Sunday edition of the *Philadelphia Inquirer.* The newspaper contained an Arts & Entertainment Section, and on page D1 of that section was an article whose headline blared: SUNDANCE WINNERS ANNOUNCED! From there the article went on to cover this noteworthy film festival and the 20 categories for which the awards were given. One film in particular made quite a splash, and hauled in First Place for Best First Film, Best First Director, Best Editing, and Best Cinematic Abstraction. It was called *The Confessor*, and it was made by someone named Leonard D'arava. But no one knew who this person was and, alas, the awards were never claimed.

BOOK TWO:
THE HOUSE

Dedication: This novella is for Jeff Funk!

PART ONE

(I)

"It was a snuff house," the skinny girl said. She almost defied description: malnutrition through which some prettiness still managed to leak out, like light under a closed door, a big-eyed human scarecrow. Long inky straight hair and skin that was oddly pallid and bright at the same time. She was probably mid-'20s but looked pushing 40, obviously worn out by dope, alcohol, and overall atrocious living. Melvin had seen her sitting by the dumpster at the Chinese carry-out it had taken him a FUCKING HOUR to find. It had been in the phone book with an address that appeared to be near the county highway, so he'd jumped in his father's HUM-V, thinking it would be just down the road. Wrong. The house truly was far removed from everything. *Which makes sense*, he'd thought. If Dirk and the realtor hadn't been bullshitting. A safe house, ideally, would be located remotely. A safe house, yes. But...

"A *snuff* house?" he asked the girl. Wasn't snuff powdered tobacco that Europeans sniffed up their noses? Somebody made powdered tobacco at this house? Then it clicked in Melvin's book-smart but otherwise very naive brain. *Snuff movies.*

But that was just an urban myth, wasn't it? Such types of films didn't really exist, surely. *Who would want to watch them?* he wondered.

He'd offered to give the skinny girl a lift, to opportunize his predicament. Melvin, only now, realized why she might be sitting near the dumpster: for scraps of edible garbage from the restaurant. He hadn't seen anyone so destitute since he'd written that unpleasant piece on the homeless shelters in Syracuse. But when he'd asked her: "I'm a little lost. Could you tell me how to get back to Route 10?"

Her eyes seemed to vibrate with hope. "Oh, fuck yeah, man. Are you going north?"

"Yes. About forty-five minutes past Pennellville—er, at least I think it's about that far, but I'm not sure because once I turned off to try and find this carry-out place, I—"

She spoke very quickly, like hyperventilation. "Oh, that fuckin' rocks, man! Can you give me a ride? I'm going that way myself, and, shit, I really NEED to get there. Almost no one goes north past this shit little shopping center. It's boondocks up there, man."

You can say that again, Melvin thought, now that he'd been up at the house for one day. "I'd be happy to give you a ride. You can guide me."

"Oh, fuck yeah, thanks. Shit. This is great. And I'll make it worth your while, too."

Melvin had no idea what she meant by that but he'd soon find out. His sense of direction was awful—as awful as his social adaptations—and Dad's space-cadet new wife probably didn't have her cell phone on her, not that she would know the directions either.

Anyhoo, that's how the conversation had started, and now this nearly cadaverous dark-haired and waxen-fleshed urchin sat beside him in the HUM-V, eating one of the bags of shrimp toast, cheeks stuffed like a chipmunk or, *a squirrel*, Melvin thought, bemused by the coincidence, for, when he'd asked, "What's, uh, what's your name?" she'd answered very quickly, "Well, gee, shit, my real name's Shirley but everybody calls me Squirrelly, 'cos, fuck, I guess I'm kind of a squirrelly person, ya know? And that's what the other kids called me in kindergarten before my folks croaked and me'n my sister got shoved in Foster Fuckin' Care. Fuck, man, if you ever have kids, don't fuckin' die on 'em, man, 'cos holy fuckin' shit, those twisted pervs in Foster Care'll be ass-fuckin' 'em when they're six and teachin' 'em to suck cock. That's what happened to me and my sister, man. Fuckin' shit-head father had to drive shitfaced one night and rolled the station wagon right off the fuckin' Mohawk River bridge, with him'n my mom in it. They fuckin' froze to death in the water, man, and I was five and my sister was seven, and that was the end of the line for us. Oh, fuck, but what was I saying? Yeah. Squirrelly Shirley, they called me."

The name fit, with or without the staccato-burst, jonesing-junkie description of her less-than-flowery childhood. Melvin felt sorry for her, as least as far as he could comprehend anything beyond the shelter of his

inadequate-and-socially-oblivious-rich-boy-still-living-with-his-father-even-at-age-33 life.

Driving, he sipped his bottle of Snapple and said, "Wow, I'm really sorry to hear that."

"What? That my name's Squirrelly?"

"Er, well, no. I mean—"

"We still gotta half hour on the road so how 'bout I suck your dick now while you're driving?"

Melvin shuddered, nearly spat out a mouthful of Snapple when she immediately and with no compunction whatsoever, leaned over in the passenger seat and began to caress his crotch. Melvin's inexperienced and quite virgin penis hardened just as immediately.

"I'll get'cha off good and then maybe you could lay twenty or maybe forty bucks on me. It's good head and I won't rush ya. Oh, and can I have your egg rolls when I'm done? I haven't eaten in, like, three motherfuckin' days."

Melvin was shaking he was so nervous. *A pruh-pruh-pruh—prostitute!* Her little white hand tended his crotch like an expert doughmaker's, kneading, kneading. *Oh, oh! This is going to be wonderful!* He looked over at the blanched face framed by hair black and shiny as volcanic glass. She wore cutoff jeans trimmed so high that he could see a few stray black pubic hairs. Her skinny legs extended, crossed. She also wore a white tubetop with coffee stains...or some other manner of stain, and as she played with Melvin's crotch some more, she pulled the tubetop down to reveal raving white flaps of skin for breasts, and nipples large as lenses on a typical pair of glasses. These nipples, however, weren't circles but instead irregular

ovals. In fact they looked more like chewed beef jerky than anything else. In summation, then, her mammarian attributes were ugly and non-arousing from *any* conventional viewpoint. Not a Class Rack, in other words.

Melvin's penis tremored as did most of the rest of him, his testicles drawing up. Squirrelly's breasts would be sure to turn off most men, yet Melvin found them to be the most erotic thing he'd ever seen in his life for one reason alone: aside from those few glimpses of his father's new wife's bare bosom (which was another story), he'd never seen "live" breasts before —ever. On Cinemax, sure, and in magazines owned by his few acquaintances at the paper. His social introversion, for instance, even at age 33, excluded him from the possibility of going to a strip joint. It also excluded him from a trip to one of Syracuse's many adult video stores where he could rent pornography and, hence, see attractive naked women having sex. Likewise, the idea of soliciting a prostitute for an actual sexual experience that involved a woman instead of his hand was impossible. And getting laid the normal way? Asking a girl out on a date and cultivating mutual interests and eventually going to bed with her?

No, Melvin was far too inept for that as well. He was a social basket case who didn't even have enough courage or acumen to pursue anything but small talk with women.

Which was why he ejaculated fervently in his pants when Squirrelly pulled down her top to flash raggy tits.

Melvin almost drove off the road, his orgasm was so intense.

"Ah-ah...aaaaaaaaaaaah..."

Squirrelly could feel some penetrating dampness on her hand. She blinked, confused. "Shit, man. Did you come?"

"I-I—"

"You didn't even give me time to get it out!" she giggled.

"Oh-oh-oh. That was great..."

She pulled her top back up, shrugging. "Cool. So you're gonna give me twenty bucks, right? I really fuckin' need it, man. I mean, you must be pretty rich driving a ride like this. It would be even better if you could give me...forty!"

He was still catching his breath. He dug a $100 bill from the pocket of his Armani Bermuda shorts and gave it to her.

Eyes bloomed large as blood-shot cue balls. "Oh, man, you fuckin' ROCK!"

I wonder, he dared, *if she would go out with me...*

"Can I have your egg rolls too?" she inquired.

He waved a hand. "Sure. You can eat it all if you want."

She squealed with delight, bouncing in the plush seat, and then leaned over and kissed him right on the lips.

This, in a very convoluted way, and via writing that would surely be deemed as less-than-expert, communicates the very first sexual experience of Melvin Paraday's life.

(II)

Yes, upstate New York was an arctic wasteland akin to, say, Vladivostok during the winter, and a perennial black hole for taxes, but during the summer months, it really was an absolutely beautiful place. Rolling, verdant green hills, cozy old Colonial houses, and an endless blue sky. Melvin had lived there all of his life. Just because he was socially inept didn't mean he was shallow. He was actually very smart, had always excelled in school, and truly could appreciate such transcendental things as natural beauty and how it related to an evolved mankind.

Squirrelly, on the other hand, was probably not as transcendentally capable. She scratched her stubbled underarms, unconsciously sniffed her fingers, and spat out the window. She likely weighed less than a hundred pounds, yet she did indeed consume all thirty dollars' worth of carry-out Chinese food. Her exposed midriff stuck out as a tight little pot now, which rumbled.

She continued to chatter away.

"Yeah, man, a snuff house. Used to be where Big Paul V had his people make his grossest flicks."

Flicks, Melvin thought. He'd been right. *Not tobacco, pornography.* Dirk had mentioned that too. "Big Paul V—would that be Paul Vinchetti?"

"Oh fuck yeah, man. You've heard of him? Worst motherfucker to ever walk the planet. Big Paul V Junior's the son of Vinch The Eye, and when The Eye croaked, Paul took over the whole underground porn gig for the mob. And can you believe it? All the feds got him on was tax evasion and contempt of court but shit, man, they laid 20 years on him with no parole."

So it's all true. I'm renting a house that used to be mafioso...

"Paul went up to the federal supermax in Ray Brook a couple of years ago. I didn't even know anyone lived in the house. Did you *buy* that place?"

"No, I'm renting it." Melvin didn't bother saying why.

"Shit, you picked a hell of a place to rent. That's a fuckin' horror house, man. The Vinchettis used that house to make their worst snuff since all the way back in the '70s when The Eye was the toughest don on the east coast. And my sister—" She grabbed Melvin's arm as if to divulge something infamous. "She was *in* the house once."

"Your sister?"

"Yeah, her name was *Spooky.*"

Melvin's brow rose. "Was? You mean—"

"Well, she disappeared a long time ago. Used to be a model in New York but she got methed out and then Vinchetti put her on the street. Thank God I never got near his people, huh? After she got too beat to turn tricks, they used her for scat flicks and she actually made one in that hell-house you're renting—"

"Scat...flicks?"

She didn't hear him. "—and that was only a couple of years before she disappeared." Her birdlike shoulders shrugged again. "She probably OD'd or they just said fuck it and finished her off in a snuff. I heard she said something to piss Vinch off and they cut off her arms to use her in kinks."

The words that came so nonchalantly out of her mouth stunned him. *What the heck is she talking about? Cut off her arms? Kinks? And—*

"What are *scat* flicks?"

"Piss flicks, shit flicks, puke flicks, stuff like that. You know."

No. Melvin did not know.

He had no fucking idea.

"I-I really need to talk to you," he stammered. The road wound up, up, up through beautiful summer countryside. "About the house. What I've heard about it is—"

"Is it's fuckin' *haunted*," she finished as if clairvoyant. "Lotta fuckin' stories about that house, man. Main reason I believe 'em is what Spooky said last time I saw her alive."

Melvin seized up with excitement behind the wheel. It was nearly the same excitement as having his crotch fondled by a woman for the first time in his life. Not just for the article, but the mere fact that he was interacting with a woman—like a regular person! "What?" he close to begged. "What did Spooky say?"

"Well, nobody used the house for anything all through the '80s and most of the '90s 'cos of that. Ask any of Vinchetti's soldiers. They say that place was so fuckin' haunted sometimes they'd run out of the joint blubbering like babies, and I'm not talking wimps, man, I'm talking buttons and hitters and subs Vinch'd hired for the real sick work. These guys would chop up a judge's *baby* or cut the face off a cop's wife without thinking twice but they wouldn't go *near* that house. So they just never used the place for anything. But one day some new jobber took Spooky up there for a scat. She said she heard voices and saw chicks walking around the place right in front of them but they weren't really there. The ghosts would write shit in the windows. And they kept hearing a radio playing music and news from 1977, which makes sense 'cos that's the last time the house was actually lived in, and

some guy pulled a psych-job on some of Vinch's down-and-dirtiest scat chicks. Did 'em with an ax, I think. Oh, and it turns out there was no radio anywhere in the place but they could hear it anyway. Now, sure, people bullshit and make up stories about places, but I believe this 'cos it was my sister who told me, and there ain't no way she'd lie to me about something like that. No reason."

More corroboration. Melvin couldn't have been more enthused. *This'll be great! Dirk'll love it!*

Squirrelly clearly hadn't washed in a while; Melvin could smell musky B.O. and oil secretions from her hair. Her teeth were a mess, and she kept scratching her legs for no apparent reason. Crack bugs. Her lips were glossed from the grease in the Chinese food that she'd just about inhaled.

"I'm actually stayin' at a place just a little ways north of the Vinchetti house—"

"That compound?" He and Dad's fruity wife had seen it yesterday when they'd staked out the grounds. "The realtor said it was uninhabited."

"We shack up there sometimes," Squirrelly said, "'Cos no one bothers to run us off. Me and Chopper and some of the D's, in between their runs."

"You and...Chopper?"

"Yeah, he's my guy."

Melvin gulped. "You—you have a boyfriend named *Chopper?*"

"Well, yeah, sort of. I take care of him and his people when they're upstate. He and his boys run crack from Florida, bring it up here on their bikes. Never heard of the D's? It's a motorcycle gang. The St. Pete Decapitators."

Some of Melvin's zeal reclined. *Great. She's got a boyfriend named Chopper and he's in a motorcycle gang called the Decapitators.* Now he could *never* ask her out on a date! But at least she was staying nearby. The compound, in fact, was the only other dwelling within twenty miles of the Vinchetti house. Maybe he'd be able to interview her for the article.

"What exactly is that place?" he asked next. "This compound? It looked sort of like military barracks or something."

"Don't know," she said. "But it's a pretty creepy place itself. You could come down and look at it but... Well, you better not, not while Chopper's there. Sometimes he gets crazy from Milwaukee's Best and PCP. He might kill ya."

Melvin gulped again.

"One time we went into a hardware store to buy denatured alcohol 'cos sometimes the D's make kat, and there's, like, nobody in the store except the old man behind the counter, so the old man winks at me and makes some comment about how he likes my butt and, man, that was it for Chopper. He vised the old guy's head into the paint-shaker and turned it on high! Fucked him ALL up!"

No. Melvin would not be going to the compound again.

Around the next green, sweeping bend, the house loomed. He could see Gwyneth's Corvette parked out front, Gwyneth herself wandering around the sloping front yard. Melvin drove past the end of the driveway and pulled over on the shoulder about a mile down, near the compound, where he dropped Squirrelly off. "I like you! You're not a dick like most johns!" She gave him a big wet greasy kiss, said "Thanks, man!" and got out and

skipped away toward the old fenced-in grounds. Melvin watched after her, smiling in sentiment.

My first kiss! My first handjob...sort of!

All she'd left in the bag was a single fortune cookie. Melvin crunched it down and read the tiny slip of paper.

PREPARE TO BE EMBRACED BY SOMETHING FROM THE PAST, it read.

He turned the HUM-V around.

And drove back up to the house.

(III)

Backtrack two days.

It went like this.

"It's a half hour or so past Pennellville on the county highway," said Dirk, the editor-in-chief, at lunch. "I want you to check it out. You're the only guy on my staff who does what I tell him. And I'll give you a bonus, in advance."

"How much?" Melvin asked.

Dirk busted out in his annoying belly-laugh. "How ever much that burger you're eating costs, tough guy!"

"Thanks, boss."

Dirk looked like a fat version of George Bush with long hair. He wasn't a very nice guy and he used people they way he was using the chicken wings:

after he sucked the meat off, he discarded the rest, useless. "We need more funky stuff in this piece of shit we call a human-interest newspaper," Dirk said. "The big piece last week was about the rising price of bulk tomatoes and how it will affect Syracuse culinary culture. That's really stretching for something to write about."

"Yeah, but ghosts, haunted houses?" Melvin asked. "Isn't that contrived?"

Dirk's eyes narrowed. "What's that mean?"

"Isn't it kind of hokey, tabloidish?"

"Well, yeah, that's what I mean. The upscale yuppie punks in this city don't want to read news. And they don't want to read about tomatoes, either, or Vitamin E or the stolen wheelchair black market or cigarette additives. They want to read something scary and fun! So just fuckin' go to this fuckin' house and write a piece about it. We'll call it ‘The Most Haunted House in Upstate' or something like that. Stuff like this'll up our advertiser rates, you watch. Write the piece. I'll give you an extra twenty-five bucks."

Dirk was serious. Not that being paid piss-poor by the paper mattered. *Thank God for Dad,* Melvin thought. *I...don't think I'd do very well working in McDonald's.* But the conversation got some cogs turning. "The... *What's* the place called? The Vincent house?"

"The Vinchetti house," Dirk corrected. "Used to be owned by Paul Vinchetti, *big* mob boss out of the Utica, Rome area. Made underground porn in the house, real ugly stuff. There were murders there in the late '70s. Some kid went caveman in the joint. Big time."

The most vague recognition began to flitter. Melvin pointed a french fry like an instructor's stick. "Oh, yes, I have heard of it. I remember some

people talking about it in college. They'd go up there for beer parties during the breaks."

"Did you go?" Dirk cut in.

Melvin stammered. "Well, er, nuh-no." Then he said fast, "But these people swore it's *really* haunted." Another thought flashed, a conflict of sorts. "But I need to tell you, I might not be right for the piece. I don't believe in ghosts."

Dirk winced. "I don't give a fuck. Just write the piece. What are you, Bob Fuckin' Woodward?" His fingers were red from Buffalo wings. "Five, six years ago, before I hired your sorry ass, one of my writers did a piece on psychics and he interviewed this old dude named Alexander Nyvysk, an ex-priest. He died in Florida last year, I read. But, anyway, his gig was he'd travel across the country to investigate houses that were supposedly haunted. In the interview he said he couldn't stay in the Vinchetti house more than a couple hours. The place burned out his equipment the minute he plugged it in. And he took some other psychics with him, and one of them fucking died. Heart attack within five minutes after walking into the place. Nyvysk said the Vinchetti house is more haunted than any house he'd ever investigated, and he'd been doing it for over twenty years. It's the perfect house to do a write-up on. Nobody's going to pick up a free city paper if they know it ain't got nothing in it except political editorials and Greenpeace save the fucking whale hippie shit like that. And tomato prices. We need stuff that's got some kick, and I don't care if you...make stuff up along the way. You can't fucking walk and chew gum at the same time, Melvin, but you can write decent articles with some snap and style."

Melvin frowned. "Thanks. And I'll really be looking forward to that extra twenty-five dollars."

Now Dirk's chin was running red with wing sauce. "Yeah, yeah, so go up there for a week and write it."

"Dirk, I can't just walk into the house and live there for a week."

"Yes, you can. I already rented it for you. Go to the realtor's next door and pick up the key."

This sounded odd. "You rented it in advance, for a *week?* Dirk, you're the tightest cheapskate I've ever known. I can't see you renting a house for a week just for me to write an article."

"Let me put it this way, I got the place for the right price. That's how popular a rental this joint is."

Wow. Melvin thought about it. *You know, this might be kind of fun.* "All right, I'll do it. I'll leave tomorrow."

"Good man." Dirk ripped another big belly laugh loud enough for other patrons of the tavern to turn their heads and frown. He passed Melvin twenty-five dollars. "Your bonus, see? In advance, just so you know I'm serious. You're my *best* writer, Melvin."

I know, Melvin thought. *So why can't I get a job on a real newspaper?*

Melvin excused himself for the bathroom, and when he returned, he saw that Dirk had left, sticking Melvin with the tab for lunch. The tab came to just over twenty-five dollars.

(IV)

"How many people have rented this house?" Melvin was asking the realtor.

The man never introduced himself, scarcely even looked at Melvin when he'd come into the office, as though Melvin reminded him of someone he didn't like, or an unpleasant experience. "Well, none," the man answered, scribbling something on a lined pad. "When Paul Vinchetti Jr. went to prison, the state of New York seized all his assets. Any of his property was sold or taken over by the holding company that owns this office. Most of the land we sold off, but this house and a condo he had in Utica we rent...or *try* to rent, in this case." The bald realtor looked more like a pawn shop clerk; he wore one of those tacky wool sports jackets with patches; the jacket was flecked with cigarette ashes. Some indefinite resemblance occurred to Melvin but he couldn't identify it.

Then the man looked up at Melvin directly for the first time, with a glimmer of anticipation in his eye. "You want to buy the place? Five grand, and you get two acres."

"No, really," Melvin began.

"Like I said, four grand."

"I'm not interested in buying it," Melvin tried to make clear. "But why offer to rent it at all? It doesn't sound marketable." He eyed the feeble rental brochure. "It looks like a dump to me."

"It is, and, no, it isn't marketable." The realtor was back to scribbling. "We're just trying to get *something* out of the place. It's not worth the cost of knocking it down and trying to sell the land alone. Who wants to live way

out there anyway? In the winter, way out there? You might as well be in the middle of Finland. They don't even send plows up that far when it snows. Why? No one lives past the southwest junction off the county highway. But we're thinking maybe this article you're writing will attract these ghost-hunter weirdos."

"*We're* thinking?"

"Yeah, Dirk. He's my brother."

Of course. Hence the indefinite resemblance. *Great. A bald, tackier version of my boss.* Melvin shook his head. "I get it. Then you split the rental fees with Dirk after it becomes a hot location for ghost-hunters." *I'm just a pawn in a scam for my boss to make money!* Melvin had never felt so used, so duped. "So it's all fabrication?"

"What? That it used to be a safe house for the mob? Hell no, that ain't no fabrication."

"I meant the part about it being haunted," Melvin elaborated. "*That's* fabrication, right?"

The realtor looked up, deadpan. "No." Then he looked back down again, to his scribbling.

Seems convincing, Melvin thought. *But he's just a good actor. Like Dirk. A professional B.S. artist.* What else did Melvin have to do, though? Quit the paper on a personal ethics conflict? *And work at McDonald's?* he finished. Dad would kick him out if he didn't work. He tried to find some consolation. *I'll look at it as...a professional challenge. Write something fascinating and provocative—*

He glanced again at the brochure picture.

—about a boring little house in the hills.

"What about neighbors?" Melvin asked the logical question. He'd need people to interview.

"There aren't any, not for twenty, maybe twenty-five, miles. The only other dwelling is a mile or two down the hill, an old compound."

"A compound? What do you mean?"

"I actually don't know what it is, er, I mean I don't know what it used to be. Like maybe it used to be a ranch. There's a lot of fenced in property, a bunch of dorm buildings, a church, stuff like that. But there's nobody there. It's totally uninhabited."

A strike out. "What about stores? What about shopping centers, a post office, anything with people. I need people to interview, locals who might know something about the house."

"There's no one. Ziltch," the realtor said. Every so often, he'd glance up at Melvin, squint as if looking at something that bothered him, then look back down.

Melvin smiled at the realtor. "You're trying to pass this Vinchetti place off to me as a haunted house and I'll bet you've never even been there."

A pause. "I was there," the realtor said. "Once."

More cryptic innuendo.

Melvin wasn't even serious anymore. "And I guess you saw a ghost, right?"

Deadpan. "Yeah. So did my wife."

Is this guy...hmm, Melvin thought of the response.

"When we got charge of the place, I drove up there with my wife to take a look, and to take the picture for the brochure. So my wife walked into one of the back bedrooms and collapsed right away."

"She collapsed?"

"Yeah, she collapsed—"

"That doesn't necessarily mean the place is haunted. Did she say what she saw that caused her to—"

"She collapsed and, see, she was six months pregnant," the realtor unreeled in a wavering voice, "and she had a miscarriage right there on the floor. The walls were splattered with blood and I start screaming but when I open my eyes again, the walls are clean. Anyway, I'm half-nuts by what happened, I don't know which end is up, so I pick the fetus up—not even realizing that it's dead—and I'm trying to run out to the car and drive it to the hospital, but when I get back out to the front room, there's this guy standing in the doorway, looking right at me, a skinny, geeky-looking dude, and he's got blood all over him, and he's grinning at me. He's standing *right there*, real, solid—" He rapped his knuckles hard on his blotter— "real as this desk. It wasn't some cloudy vision like Casper the fucking ghost, it wasn't like an overlapped picture or some shit. It was real, a real guy standing there. Then—" He snapped his fingers. "He was gone."

Melvin sat bolted to the chair. "I-I-I..."

The realtor maintained the look of utter distaste. He slid the key across the desk. "Take the key and get out of here. You give me the creeps."

Melvin was waylaid. "*I* give you the creeps? *Me?* I'm harmless, I'm absolutely innocuous. I'm unassuming, introverted, and utterly passive.

How can I possibly give you the creeps?"

The realtor got up, began to walk toward a back office. "You look a hell of a lot like the ghost I saw standing in that doorway. Now get out of here."

(V)

Melodrama, Melvin considered, driving back to his father's. *He either made it all up to induce me to write the article, or maybe his wife really did have a miscarriage up there, and the rest was delusion. A tragedy like that? Of course the guy thought he saw a ghost.*

It was in the sprawl of rolling hillsides beyond Syracuse that Melvin's father had erected his millionaire's monument: a multi-storied masterpiece (or monstrosity, depending on one's tastes) that could've passed for Frank Lloyd Wright with its glass walls, etched masonry and slanted roofs. The north and south wings reached back to bracket the Olympic-sized swimming pool, tennis courts, and gardens, as well as the complex of garages that sheltered Dear Old Dad's dozen-plus automobiles. It should be needless to say, then, that Melvin's father—a debonaire yet hip 57-year-old by the name of Winston Paraday—was rich, via the ownership of roughly twenty car dealerships, a construction company, and a statewide electrical contracting firm. Pigshit rich was what he might be called, and perhaps the reader may find an intended pun there. An impressive guesthouse sat rearwards on the property, and this is where Melvin lived. Several years after Melvin had graduated from college, his father had resigned to him:

"Melvin, you're my son and I love you. I'll always take care of you, even if you *never* become able to take care of yourself. For whatever reason—your psychological makeup, your upbringing, or, shit, maybe the baby food we fed you—you're not socialized. You can't talk to people without stammering. You can't be around more than two other human beings at the same time without looking like you're about to have a seizure. You're too nervous to even apply for a job. Whatever the reason, it doesn't matter. You're my responsibility because, after all, it was my sperm that helped bring you into the world. Well...I'm pretty sure it was my sperm."

Melvin started at the disturbing comment...then laughed. Of course, Dad was joking! Melvin knew very little about his biological mother, just that she'd abandoned Dad shortly after Melvin had been born, and had purportedly cleaned out a fortune in jewelry and stash-cash from the safe. She'd run off with a man who'd sold Kirby vacuum cleaners. "A silly tramp, Melvin," Dad had explained once. "It sounds like a lousy thing to say but it's true. Your mother was a sleazy, gold-digging tramp. Great in bed, yes, and a terrific body, but not much cooking upstairs and she was a thief. I can only blame myself for being stupid enough to marry her."

Melvin didn't contemplate the statement too deeply. *If he hadn't married her,* Melvin deduced, *I would never have been born. But he doesn't mean...*

Melvin stopped the thought there.

Dad slapped him on the back. "Son, your mother's legs were like a 7-Eleven. Open all night. But don't feel bad. You obviously inherited my brains, not hers. I'm a rich man, always have been, and I know that rich people are often deemed shallow and materialistic...but—Jesus!—it really

pissed me off when she ran off with that chump. That fuckin' vacuum cleaner cost three hundred bucks...and she took that too." Melvin had been in junior high when Dad had finally confessed this, and since that time Winston Paraday had only dated casually, avoiding re-marriage, until three weeks ago when he'd wed Gwyneth. The day before the ceremony, Melvin had been bold enough to ask, "Hey, Dad. Remember a long time ago when you told me about my biological mother?"

Dad had been adjusting his tuxedo tie. "Oh, sure. Thieving, gold-digging tramp. Even stole the vacuum cleaner I paid three hundred bucks for to the guy she was fucking behind my back."

Melvin smirked. By now he'd long since closed his mind to the possibility that his true father may well have been a vacuum cleaner salesman. "Do you remember what else you said?"

"Uh...what?"

"You said you'd never get married again."

Dad paused in the mirror. "You're right, I did."

"So why are you getting married now? Gwyneth seems very nice but you haven't really known her that long, have you? She's twenty years younger than you and you've got nothing in common with her."

"So?" Dad chuckled. "Son, I'm 57 years old—I've been playing the millionaire swinger too long. And—" Dad winked. "Gwyneth has *great* tits. Somebody should hang them up in the National Gallery of Art."

"Terrific, Dad. She has great tits." For a self-made millionaire, Dad wasn't particularly perceptive. "But what about her character? How do you know

she's not just like my mother? A gold-digger, who only wants you for your money?"

"Pre-nup, son. She agreed to a divorce settlement of zero dollars and zero cents. What a woman, huh? And you've talked to her, you know. She's sort of a space cadet. She says she's a Marxist."

Melvin smiled. "Well, for a Marxist she seems pretty content to drive around in your Corvette and live in a million-dollar house."

"Million-and-a-half, Melvin. And what I should say is she's a typical hypocritical liberal but, really, who cares? She loves me in her own way and I love her in mine...if you know what I mean."

Melvin hadn't a clue as to what his father meant, but he didn't let on. "Well, I hope you and Gwyneth have a great marriage, Dad."

Dad nodded, still scrutinizing himself in the mirror. "Thanks, son, and thanks for your concern. In all honesty, I'm marrying her because she's gorgeous and she's marrying me because she loves the house and wants to be taken care of. And that's cool. When you get to be my age, you get realistic."

An elucidating conversation, at least.

Melvin had only actually spoken to Gwyneth a few times before the wedding. She turned one of the upstairs rooms into a work parlor, entertaining an unusual hobby:

"I'm an ossarial mosaicist," she'd told him in a cool, spacy voice when she'd invited him in to show him. "It's the chief element of my art."

Melvin only half-heard her at first, his attentions diverted more directly by her body. *Dad wasn't kidding when he said she's got great tits.* She sat

hunched over at a table, working on something with a file. Beside her sat a plastic bottle of Hershey's Chocolate Syrup; the bottle had a straw sticking out of it. *She drinks chcolate syrup straight out of the bottle!* Melvin thought. *Gross!*

All she wore was a T-shirt stretched to the limit of its cotton by a pair of stacked 36C's. She also wore holey jeans and Birkenstocks—a very hip Seattle look, sort of an Earth Mother on a creative plane. Melvin knew full well he'd be masturbating vigorously first chance he got, locking Gwyneth's lusty image in his head.

Finally he responded. "Ossarial? What's that?"

"Bones," she said. "I make mosaics, and I work with ossarial materials instead of more typical resources like tile, stained glass, colored metal." She never looked at him as she explained the details of her hobby, instead focusing on filing what appeared to be, indeed, a piece of bone in a rubber-lipped vise. "Then I sell my work on eBay, to collectors. Take one of my cards over there on the desk."

Confused but dully interested, Melvin walked over, picked up a white business card out of the caddy. It read:

GWYNETH SMITH —
OSSARIAL CRAFTS & CRUCIFICTIVE ICONOGRAPHY.

Now that's a mouthful, Melvin thought. But was she a total nut or was she actually an accomplished craftswoman?

Now he noticed examples of her work set up on shelves at the back of the room. This work was far more intricate than acorn-wreaths and pine-cone centerpieces. Darkly stained framed plaques sported myriad variations of cruciform designs which were all composed of meticulously etched, cut, and angled bone fragments. Melvin found the work to be quite handsome at first glance, yet at second glance it seemed rather tired. Lava lamps and Chia Pets, alas, all tended to wind up in the garbage a few weeks after purchase.

Melvin had to wonder: *She sells this stuff? Who wants pieces of bones hanging on their walls?*

"It's...very good," he said.

"Most people don't understand it—the symbology," she said.

When he looked back at her all he could see was her head full of long curly wheat-colored hair and the provocative pear-shape of the transition of her waist to rump in the chair. *Wow, she's really good-looking!*

"Oh, Christian symbols, you mean?"

"No, no." Her tone stiffened to something short of irritation. "For any mythology, even personal ones. Self-sacrifice, messianic deliverance. It's something we all long for, don't you think?"

"Oh...sure." *At least she's got a decent vocabulary.* Melvin told himself. But he was no dummy himself—a 4.0 student when he'd been in college. He fleetingly thought back to an old theology class, remembering his Kierkegaard. "Only the naked existential leap of faith brings the spirit of mankind away from the corrupt strictures of denominationalism and closer to God through Christ."

Gwyneth stopped filing, and didn't say anything for several moments. She took a sip of Hershey's from the straw. "That's very profound, Melvin. Most people don't see that in my work."

Neither do I, he admitted. *But it sounded good.*

But why did he feel the sudden need to impress her? To appeal to her phony-granola-Left-Coast-artsy-fartsy-hypocritical-pseudo-intellectuality? This was something new to him. He dug back into his memory for more college philosophical pedantry: "Kind of reminds me of the way some of the hardcore dialectical idealists and phenomenalists tried to transfigure artistic verity into functional philosophy. You know, Jaspers, Spinoza, Immanuel Kant? The artistic image, when pursued honestly, becomes an immortal symbol—a *piece* of the artist—that will, in a sense, live forever. Immortality equals salvation, and nature, according to Spinoza, equals God. Transitively, then, you use bone fragments to craft your art—the propagation of your creative verity—the sense of *truth* in your artist's heart. Nature equals God, and the bone fragments come from nature. The rest reverts to the common summation of Kantian artistic transcendental idealism, essentially the working parts of the philosophy made objective, a series of mathematical equations: salvation for the artist equals immortality, bones come from nature and nature equals God, Christ—symbolized by the crosses in all your work—equals salvation. The equation ends where it begins, and solves itself through its own interrogative cycle."

Due to the angle at which he stood, Melvin couldn't see Gwyneth's nipples beneath the tight T-shirt grow to the size of football cleats.

She stopped her filing. She didn't look at him but she wiped the corner of an eye and whispered, "Finally. Someone understands me."

Melvin feigned more focus on the outwardly interesting but ultimately mediocre bone-mosaics. "Wow, you really are very talented. These plaques are beautiful...and so meaningful, too," he said but all the while was thinking, *Bone mosaics? Ossarial crucifictive art? What a joke. I wouldn't pay five bucks for one of these things.*

"You're very smart," Gwyneth said.

"I did all right in school."

"And you're an artist yourself, really. You're a journalist."

I'm not even really a journalist, he admitted to himself. *I write fluff for a free city paper.* "I do my best."

"How unique that I'll be a part of your family once your father and I are married."

"Yeah, I guess that means you'll be my stepmother."

Another long pause. She lit a cigarette that smelled cloying; its paper was pink. It wasn't marijuana; Melvin had smelled that crap before in college. At that moment he caught her looking at him very appraisingly—that is, she was looking at his reflection in the long mirror mounted behind the door.

Oh my God, he thought, eyes widening. He could see her clearly aroused nipples in the reflection. *They look like somebody's got their thumbs sticking up under her T-shirt!*

Melvin's penis...quaked.

She said in that same calm, very low tone: "We have a lot in common, you and I."

"We...do?" Her nipples were riveting; in fact, they looked...like rivets! "Oh, art, philosophy, sure." He tried to sound cool.

"And you're a very attractive young man."

Now Melvin frowned. The door mirror showed him his reflection in detail: skinny, stooped shoulders, buck teeth. His neck had to have been a couple inches longer than normal, and his adam's apple jutted. Richard Simmons hair made a mess of his head.

Melvin was the ultimate geek.

"I...am?"

"Thank you for your insights about my art," she said. "You're not only attractive, your intellect is very refreshing. We're going to be great friends."

Melvin's titanic adam's apple bobbed as he gulped. He bid his adieu, then retreated quickly to his cottage and masturbated in grand style.

(VI)

The above convoluted transition, of course, confusingly describing Melvin's first introduction to Gwyneth's ossarial craftwork, occurred before his assignment to write about the Vinchetti house, this being an author's tool to propel the narrative in a way that's more interesting than starting at the beginning and writing through in a linear fashion to the end. Sometimes this doesn't work, however, leaving the narrative garbled, clotted, and seemingly directionless.

Some authors, though, get away with it regardless.

(VII)

It also occurred twenty-four hours before Melvin and Gwyneth would first step into the Vinchetti house, after which Melvin would drive a considerable distance to procure carry-out Chinese food only to have it eaten in its entirety by a malnourished prostitute named Squirrelly, who would not only grace Melvin with the first sort-of hand job of his life but also convey quite a bit of pertinent information regarding the house itself...

«««—»»»

Dad seemed questioning at first, his brow squished up into a net of ridges. "And *where* is this house?"

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"Pennellville," Melvin said. "Or I should say *past* Pennellville. Dirk wants me up there for a week or so."

"Oh, so it's for your job."

"Right, Dad." Melvin manufactured a quick, harmless lie. "I'm writing a piece on classic old homes of upstate." He didn't think it wise to tell Dad the whole truth: that he was actually writing *bullshit* about classic old *haunted* homes of upstate. "So I just wanted to let you know I'll be gone for a while."

"Excellent," Dad approved. "It'll be good for you, getting out, interacting, being in a new place and meeting new people."

Melvin was terrified of meeting new people but that was neither here, nor there. He didn't bother telling his father that there would likely be *no* new people to meet, not unless the realtor's description of the area as remote was exaggeration. "Yeah, Dad. I'm really trying to break out of my shell."

"Good, good. Well, since you'll be away for a week or more, you'll need money."

Bingo. When Dad was in the right mood, he was very favorably predictable. "That would be great," Melvin said. "Maybe a hundred or so?"

"Nonsense." Dad flipped open his wallet like the communicator on *Star Trek.* "You'll need more than that, because you'll be doing me a service at the same time."

Before Melvin could ask, Dad handed him two grand in hundreds. *Do I have a great father or what?*

But what was this "service?"

"It just so happens that I'll be in Providence all next week for a business conference. It's the annual meeting for the American Automobile Dealers."

"Oh," Melvin said. "What a coincidence."

"Yes. And I don't want Gwyneth alone in this big house for all that time." Dad leaned over and whispered, "She's a little nutty. God knows what she'd get into—"

"I heard that!" Gwyneth's voice sailed down from upstairs.

Dad frowned. He whispered even lower. "So I want you to take her with you. I don't want her in my hair at the conference."

"I heard that!"

Now Dad sighed. "So look after her for me."

Melvin looked at the two grand. "Sure, Dad. Anything for you."

"Good boy. And take whichever cars you want."

The Hummer, Melvin thought.

"I'm taking the Vette!" Gwyneth's voice sailed down again.

"Whatever you want, honey," Dad agreed toward the stairs.

Gwyneth's voice sounded sourceless. "So where are you packing me off to?"

Melvin spoke up to answer. "A solitary old house way out in the hills."

"Oh, that sounds wonderful. I could do so much work in a natural setting like that."

"Like Thoreau at Walden Pond," Melvin added insightfully.

Gwyneth squealed with delight from wherever she was upstairs.

Dad put his arm about his son's shoulder. "Now I know you probably weren't counting on company for this writing assignment, Melvin, but you'd

be doing me a big favor—"

"No problem, Dad."

"And I need to add that, as far as Gwyneth is concerned... there are a few perks."

Perks? Melvin scratched his head. "What do you mean?"

"She's a naturalist."

Now Gwyneth's voice lanced their ears, objecting, "I've told you a million times! Not a naturalist! A *naturist!*"

"I know what a naturalist is," Melvin—former English major that he was—said. "A film-maker like Bergman, or a writer like Ibsen. The literary movement that embodies social realism against concrete modern objectivity—"

"Your son's so smart!" Gwyneth called down.

Melvin continued, "but...naturism? An interest in natural beauty? Devotion to the land? I'm not sure what naturism is."

Dad's eyes gestured toward the second floor landing. "Take a look."

"Naturism is synonymous with nudism," Gwyneth said. Her voice seemed much closer now. When Melvin glanced up, his expression registered the same way an adolescent's would, when happening upon his father's secret stash of *Playboys.*

Oh—oh—oh!

Gwyneth stood atop the landing dressed in nothing but her wedding ring and a pair of Earth shoes. Her long curly-blond tresses fell over frost-white shoulders, and more immaculate alabaster flesh flowed downward in ultimate feminine curvatures. Her navel—an inny—was an adorable slit,

and an abundant pie-wedge of light-mocha-colored pubic hair puffed forward between the white thighs. Melvin's eyes actually began to water at sight of these breasts: chiffon orbs, bigger than life—centered by pig-pink bolts of flesh. She was a Peter Paul Rubens painting standing before them...

...in which case, Melvin would've been desperate to ejaculate on the Baroque master's canvas.

"That's some woman I married, huh, son?" Dad expounded.

Melvin's mouth fell open to never utter a word. One wouldn't speak before an angel, would they? This was better than an angel, this vision of beauty nearly heavenly itself.

Gwyneth's appearance on the landing only lasted for the few seconds it took her to physically demonstrate a definition of naturism. She disappeared in a blur white as Cool-Whip.

Melvin stammered, "She-she-she... You mean she's going to be walking around *naked* the whole time we're in Pennellville? With *that* body?"

"That's a fact, my boy," Dad said. Then he blurted a fatherly laugh and slapped Melvin hard on the back. "I knew you wouldn't have a problem with her going."

No, indeed. Melvin would not.

He excused himself, citing the need to get his things packed for the trip, and instead retreated quickly to his cottage to masturbate in grand style.

PART TWO

(I)

A two-hour drive through endless, green pastures, rolling hills, and unspoiled woodland took them to the infamous Vinchetti house. Melvin led the way in the shiny HUM-V, while Gwyneth followed in candy-apple-red Corvette. Once they'd passed the small strip mall at the Route 10 junction, they didn't see any other vehicles on the road. The Vinchetti house was, indeed, out of the way.

"What a wonderful dump!" Gwyneth excitedly exclaimed when they parked in the barely defined, unpaved drive. She sauntered up the graveled sidewalk to the porch, unaware that nearly thirty years ago a heroin addict named Sissy dragged herself on her elbows out the front door, innards in tow. The poor gaunt woman had been cut in half at the waist by...

Well, that was another story.

"So this is it," Melvin muttered to himself once he disembarked from the Hummer. "This is the big bad haunted house."

"What?" Gwyneth said from the porch.

"I said what an old house." *Jeez, she's got good hearing!* It was all he could do not to shake his head looking at her just then. The high sunlight clarified every physical detail. She wore the Earth Shoes, of course, and a pair of unseemly maroon corduroy jeans that made her lower half appear to have been dipped in tacky scarlet paint. She also wore a pink T-shirt bearing the face of Vladimir Ilich Lenin and the bold words WORK WILL MAKE YOU FREE! *I guess that's why you married a millionaire*, Melvin thought,

and won't ever have to work again. Her hypocrisy blared...with her breasts...

Melvin was trying to look at the house, but her physical presence on the porch—the basic fact that her body occupied space *in front* of the house—left Melvin hopelessly sidetracked. His masturbatory impulses raged as his vision was welded to the image. *Oh. Jeez. No,* he thought choppily. The raving sunlight burned the vision of her on the porch into something so crisp, so detailed, it was like the highest resolution macro photography: the contours of her body below the waist with the ever-so-tight corduroys *enameled* to her body, the *texture* of the fabric defining her rump, the plush thighs, the satcheled pubis straining against the material. Her perfect globose breasts in the tissue-thin T-shirt burned in his eyes even more intensely, every detail of each plumpened nipple highlighted by the sun's revealing sheen: the lactiferous nodes stuck out like the first joint of a human index finger, then the graduated areolae prominent as poker chips. The remaining mammarian mass seemed mounted on Gwyneth's chest, perfect orbicular sculptures, painted in pastel-pink. Melvin could've groaned aloud as his penis squirmed, his urethra filling with pre-ejaculant.

"And it's so quaint," Gwyneth was remarking. "It doesn't matter that it's run-down—it's so solitary! I'll be able to get so much new insight for my art!"

Melvin chose not to refer to her craftwork as "art"—more like unusual knickknacks—yet he just as quickly elected not to tell her that. Instead, he tore his attention off her breasts like someone pulling hands off them. *The*

house, the house, Melvin kept telling himself. *Focus on the house! That's what you're here for!*

"It is pretty nondescript," he finally said.

She meandered the porch, dreamily waving her arms up and down. "It's an honest house. I can feel its aesthetic verity reaching out for me!"

Melvin frowned.

The house was...just a plain old single-story house, probably built in the '50s. New and very white paint made its clapboard seem radiant, and the roof appeared to have been re-shingled recently, plus new shutters and a new door with a square peep-hatch. The door shined in a wild-cherry red. The realty company had clearly gone to efforts in giving the house this bright new face but still...it looked like nothing more than a fixed-up dump that would hardly attract any practical buyers or renters. The house itself sat atop the highest hill in the vicinity, overlooking a stunningly scenic panorama.

This place is about as haunted as a dog turd, Melvin thought. There was virtually nothing scary about it.

Gwyneth traipsed back to the Corvette to grab her blue cigarettes and her big brown bottle of Hershey's Chocolate Syrup, the straw sticking out the top. She paused, looking off. "What's that down there?"

Melvin kept his hands in front of his pants, to conceal the erection. Down the hill, about a mile off, he spied a fenced perimeter full of drab gray buildings like barracks. Melvin remembered what Dirk's brother had said. "It's some kind of a compound. The realtor mentioned it, said it was the only thing other than this house in twenty miles in either direction."

Gwyneth slurped through her straw. "A compound?"

"It used to be a ranch or something."

"Hmm." Then her eyes lit up on something in the yard. "Oh my God! Look!"

Melvin sighed, watching her rush to the center of the scape of weeds that comprised the front lawn. She squatted, looking down with enthusiasm. She began collecting tiny things off the ground.

"What is that?" he asked, his nose turned up.

"Bird bones," she answered. "They're perfect! There's no rot left or anything! Totally clean!"

Oh, come on... "You mean you're going to make—"

"Bird bones are great for tracery details," she informed him, intent on picking up the tiny needles.

Melvin remained intent on her breasts and the way they hung down against the confines of the Lenin T-shirt.

She looked up at him with an excited grin. "I'll bet there's all kinds of bones out here. Animals that died during the winter, and nobody living here to clean them up?"

"You're the first person I've ever met who gets excited over dead animal bones."

"Bones are the ultimate medium for ossarial artwork, and when you find them in the wild like this? Bones of animals that have died naturally? They galvanize the true meaning of the artwork, actually imparting the animal's *spirit* into the work."

You're a kook, Melvin thought. *You're a nut-cake.*

"Melvin, these bird bones are magnificent; I need to get started right away. Get my things out of the car and take them inside please."

"Sure." *Now I get it. I'm the luggage boy.* He shook his head, chuckling. *Bird bones for a bird brain.* Heavy boxes of veneered mahogany plaques, supplies, and, yes, more bones, filled the Corvette's trunk. Melvin began to haul them out and lug them to the house. Since he wasn't psychic, there would've been no way for him to be made aware of the coincidence: that 28 years ago a 33-year-old man quite similar to him had been lugging film equipment out of the trunk of a Cadillac and trudging it up the same gravel and dirt driveway.

"Oh, and Leonard?" she called out.

Melvin frowned at her. "Leonard? Who's Leonard?"

Her face upturned in the sun appeared confused. "Did I just call you Leonard? I—I guess I did. I don't even know anybody named Leonard. Why on earth would I call you Leonard?"

Melvin stood in the drive, his back bowed as he cradled heavy boxes. "I have no idea," he replied.

"Anyway, Melvin. What I was going to say is when you get done carrying my things into the house, you can bring back some Chinese carry-out. I'm sure there's a Chinese restaurant somewhere around here. I'm starving!"

Not for twenty miles at least, he knew. "Great," he muttered. He nearly waddled back up toward the house.

"While you're doing that," she added, "I'm going to the front yard for more bones."

Gwyneth, alas, wouldn't find many animal bones, but she would indeed find one.

A particularly interesting bone indeed.

(II)

The interior of the Vinchetti House had been made-over too, of course, plainly but tidily. New paint, new carpet, modest furniture. Several small bedrooms branched off from the hall off the living room. The living room itself sported still more new but obviously budget-warehouse adornments: a chocolate-and-tan striped couch, K-Mart bookshelves and end tables, a recliner. Above the couch hung a framed print of a pasture rising above plush farmland. It hung crooked and Melvin didn't bother straightening it. A large clean white kitchen occupied the rear wing of the house.

This house is trying real hard to look nice, he thought, *but it's still a dump.*

Gwyneth had claimed the largest bedroom which also would catch the sunrise. Melvin dragged his suitcase into a smaller one. A little bed, a little dresser. It would do. His nose crinkled, though. Did something smell bad? *Place hasn't been aired out in a while*, he dismissed.

"Melvin, could you put my work stuff in the third bedroom please?" Gwyneth's cool voice resonated through the walls.

She's hogging everything, he thought. He'd wanted that room to set up his laptop in, though he still didn't really know what he would write about, nor

how he'd begin. It didn't matter. But then she said something else he didn't hear.

"What's that?" he asked, nudging into her bedroom.

His heart must've stopped for a few seconds.

Gwyneth still wore the flesh-clinging Lenin T-shirt, but she'd removed the corduroys, the immaculate white bottom and legs facing Melvin when he stuck his head in.

"I said," she repeated, "put the kitchen table in there too. I'll need it."

Melvin's jaw dropped.

Her back was still to him. She was bending over her opened suitcase on the bed, pulling clothes out. Melvin's eyes held fast to the beautiful little gap at the bottom of the buttocks, traced by dark-blond down ghosting the rear cleft of her vagina.

"Did you hear me, Melvin?"

Melvin couldn't speak. In one graceful motion, then, she stood upright, skimmed off the T-shirt, and turned around to look at him. "I'll need that kitchen table to work on. Why don't you drag it in there before you go get our Chinese?"

Some disconnected aspect of Melvin's consciousness managed to automatically respond "Okay" while his eyes remained helpless on her blaring nakedness. The breasts were like a pair of snow-white flesh-planets floating in the room.

Gwyneth looked back at him, seeming confused. "Oh, I hope this doesn't bother you," she said and subconsciously ran her hands down her plush

sides. "But your father did tell you I go sky-clad most of the time when I'm inside."

"Sky-clad?"

"Dressed in the air. Naked. That's what naturism is: acknowledging the natural self. Humans are naked creatures. All nakedness is the epitome of human beauty. It's not sexual at all."

Melvin's angry erection might debate that claim.

The bare bosom lifted when she inadvertently ran her fingers back through the golden tousles. Her pubic hair was an ample tuft yet thin at the same time. Melvin's eye could've been a zoom lens cranking down, sharpening every detail to surreal clarity: the shiny downy hair puffed out and all the lambent flesh between each root. The tender pink groove beneath it all made him want to cry.

"But if it makes you self-conscious, I'd be happy to—"

"No, no," came his next automatic response. "It doesn't make me self-conscious at all. I'm just...not really...used to..."

"Of course. But while you're getting dinner, I'm going to look around the grounds."

"You're going to...be naked...outside?" he asked.

"Of course not, silly." She held a pleated, beige sun-dress up against her. "How does this look? Too revealing?"

Melvin's knees trembled, his vision focusing again into a hyper-clarity. He could see each thread of the dress's pale fabric as it lay half-covering one sumptuous breast. His eyes panned down to the plush tummy; he could

even see the fine, transparent hairs wisping up from her groin in an adorable line to encircle her navel. "No, that's fine."

"Good." She skimmed the dress on, adjusting the bosom. Melvin wasn't sure, but he thought he might be close to ejaculating in his pants.

"I feel..." Gwyneth paused in an unfocused moment. "Weird but good. Do you?"

Now that she had the sun-dress on, Melvin regained more of his sentience. "Weird? No, not really."

"Mmm." She looked around. "I...like this room. In fact I like this house. All of a sudden I feel more creative than I have in years."

I feel HORNIER than I have in years, Melvin thought beyond all doubt.

"I can't wait to make a lattice with those bird bones. In fact, I'm going to go look for some more when you're gone."

She was all spaced out, as usual. She silently drifted about the room, appraising it. "Do you...smell something musky?" she asked without looking at him.

Maybe your vagina? "Nope," Melvin said.

"Oh, but..." She closed her eyes and inhaled, a hand pressed above her breasts. "I know it's not my imagination. There's...something." She shook her head. "It turns me on in some bizarre way."

Melvin's eyes narrowed. He *had* smelled something odd in his own bedroom but it was something unpleasant. Just stale air. *This woman's a screw-loose,* he decided. He was watching the ghost of her perfect rump slide beneath the sun-dress.

"Look here." A corner of the new wallpaper was peeling. When Gwyneth pulled some of it back, the sheetrock beneath appeared spattered with something. "Could that be *blood?*"

"It's water stains," Melvin assured. When her back turned to him again, he couldn't help it. He squeezed his crotch and nearly groaned. His pipes were dripping. *If I don't jerk off soon, I'll have a stroke...*

Now she was looking out the window into the back yard, her finger pulling back a drape. The sunlight revealed the crisp outline of her naked body beneath the beige dress. When she turned, having spied something outside, Melvin couldn't shake the inexplicable sense of macro-vision he'd seemed to acquire today, couldn't escape the notion that his eye—when it came to Gwyneth—had turned into a zoom lens of the highest quality. The image locked now: he could see every protruding detail of her nipples beneath the dress's beige fabric...

"What's...that, I wonder."

Melvin looked over her shoulder, through the glass. "It's a dog pen," he said of the small, fenced in area. He looked back farther, noticed an old wooden structure. "And there's a stable."

Unbidden, her lips turned up in a mischievous grin. She giggled, then droned in that low, cool, easy tone of hers: "I guess...they used to...keep...animals here."

Then she moved quickly out of the room without another word.

(III)

Melvin jerked off hard in the cramped little bathroom, grinding his teeth at the tsunami of images boiling over in his head. He almost stamped his feet. Just a few strokes was all it took, and then curls of his sperm were floating in the toilet water. That sun-cut silhouette of Gwyneth's bare body beneath the loose dress had been it.

He flushed and let out a long breath. *I have a feeling I'll be doing this quite a bit for the next week.*

A phone book in the kitchen had given him a vague idea of where the nearest Chinese restaurant was: at the little strip mall near the junction for Route 10. This was where Melvin had, in this order: picked up Squirrelly near the dumpster, let her eat the entirety of the Chinese food on the way back, received the first sort-of handjob of his life, and learned quite a bit about the Vinchetti House.

At least I have something to start on, Melvin thought after dropping Squirrelly off at the strange compound at the bottom of the hill. He drove back up to the house, loins still tingling—and damp—was about to pull into the drive, but then he slapped himself on the head. *Nitwit!* All he had to show for his trip—besides some decidedly spermy underpants—were several very empty bags from the Chinese place.

He spent the next two hours driving all the way back, reordering everything he'd purchased earlier, then returned to the house again.

The place did smell odd when he came back in. *What is that?* There was nothing "musky" about it at all. Had a mouse died in the wall? Soon he was grateful for the aromas pouring off the bags of carry-out. He was hungry

himself now but when he looked in Gwyneth's bedroom, and searched the rest of the house, she wasn't to be found.

Is she out in the woods somewhere? he posed to himself, *looking for more of her ridiculous bones?*

He'd need to find her, but—ever the dutiful writer—he prioritized something else first. Off the kitchen there was a little den of sorts, or perhaps it had been a pantry. This was where he'd set up his laptop to write his article. *Squirrelly gave me some great info,* he remembered. *I need to get it in my notes.*

He took the next twenty minutes to tap Squirrelly's tale about her sister seeing ghosts in the house, leaving out some of the less palatable material (*"She probably OD'd or they just said fuck it and finished her off in a snuff. I heard she said something to piss Vinch off and they cut off her arms to use her in kinks."*) *Seems best to just leave it as a mafia safe-house,* he decided, *where murders occurred*. And actually, the gist of what Squirrelly had told him corroborated some of the realtor's claims. More and more, Melvin's enthusiasm about the article grew. So what if it was bullshit?

Later in the week, he could do some refined data searches on Paul Vinchetti Jr., find out more about him, his operation. *The perfect padding!* he thought like any good journalist.

Just as he was finishing up, though, his fingers froze over the keys.

He'd heard a voice from the living room. He was certain. And it sounded like the voice had said:

"Knuckles! Get me Dick Nixon!"

Melvin lurched up, a bit nervously. Was someone in the house? The voice had been distinctly male, and distinctly carrying a Jersey accent.

"Is...anyone there?" he peeped.

He edged into the living room. *Must've been someone outside*, he realized, because he'd left the door open; only the screen door was shut. At that same moment, he heard gravel crunching under tires, saw a car pulling up in the driveway past the Corvette and Hummer. But not just any car...

A police car.

Melvin prickled, confused. *Where'd that voice come from? I know I heard a voice...*

It had to have been the cop in the car. *Maybe talking on his radio?* And the words had merely carried into the house through the screen door.

Yes. That was it.

Melvin hustled out to the driveway.

The car's doors read OSWEGO COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT. A sharp-dressed cop got out, his expression elusive behind mirror sunglasses. A big brawny good-looking guy with a buzz-cut like a Marine's. An extraordinarily large pistol hung holstered off one hip.

"Hello, sir," the cop said and nodded.

"Huh-hi," Melvin said.

"I'm Sheriff Jeff Funk; I'm the head of the county sheriff's department up here in Oswego."

"I'm Melvin Paraday." Melvin felt enfeebled. "Is there...any problem, Sheriff?"

"No, no, I just drove up to check on you. Your rental agent from Syracuse called us up to let us know you'd be up here for awhile. I just wanted to drop by, make sure everything is all right."

"Everything's fine, sir," Melvin assured him but still felt strange himself. "I'm a journalist and I'm up here to write a piece on old houses in upstate New York."

"Oh, a writer." Was it Melvin's imagination or did Sheriff Funk seem suspicious? "Well, you picked an interesting house. Oswego's a nice county full of fine people. We wouldn't want anybody writing bad things about our county. You wouldn't be doing that—" Funk slipped up his sunglasses —"would you, Mr. Paraday?"

Melvin's enfeeblement was knocked up multiple notches. "Nuh-nuh-no, sir. Whuh-what do you mean?"

Funk let his sunglasses slide back down. His face blanked as he spoke. "This house has a history, and not a good one. Lotta folks have spread rumors about it, rumors that it's haunted."

"Huh-huh-haunted?" Melvin responded.

Funk smirked, big brawny arms crossed now. "Do you know what happened in this house in 1977?"

"No, er, well, I did hear something like it used to be owned by some big mafia boss," was all Melvin admitted.

Sheriff Funk nodded curtly. "Yes, Mr. Paraday, that's correct. It was a safe house for the mob, and they supposedly used the house for a studio—to make *underground pornography.* Snuff films, films of women being raped and beaten, films with women consorting sexually with animals. And in

1977, one of the men who made these movies went berserk. Chopped up a bunch of people with an ax."

Some of Melvin's unease took a step back. This information had been hinted at before—from Dirk and his brother, from Squirrelly—but just now it occurred to him that what Sheriff Funk had just told him was still more corroboration. *More support for the article!* he realized.

Melvin lied smoothly. "Oh, good Lord, Sheriff, I didn't know anything about that; I had no idea. And I'm not even writing about the house itself anyway. It's an area piece. You know, get out of the gritty big city and rediscover New York's natural beauty. Come to Upstate with its trees and hills and rolling green pastures. That sort of piece."

Funk's head tilted. "Oh, well, that makes me feel better. Oswego County is a beautiful county indeed, and we'd love to see an article like that. I guess being a cop for so long's made me a bit cynical. We're always suspicious of the worst motives."

"Well, set your mind at ease, Sheriff," Melvin continued to lie. "There won't be anything about haunted houses or the mafia or murder in my article. It's just a weekend travel piece." Now Melvin seized an opportunity. Sheriff Funk clearly believed him...and police officers were always a wealth of information about their jurisdictions. "But I am curious about something. That ranch down at the bottom of the hill? What exactly is it?"

Now Funk seemed pleased to be of help. "Oh, it's no ranch. That's the old Epiphanite compound. After all these years, that's what people still call it."

Melvin was intrigued. "The *Epiphanite* compound?"

"It was a religious cult, you might say, hardline fundamentalist Christians. They actually settled down there in the 1800s. Sort of like those Amish folks. They believed that electricity, cars, telephones, things like that, were all evil things. They lived off the land, never left the property for all that time."

"But it doesn't appear that anyone's there now."

"Oh, no. It was actually kind of strange. They disbanded and were never seen again. The property's been unoccupied ever since."

"Where did they go?"

"No one knows."

"When did they disband?"

"1977 as a matter of fact, same time as the murders, but there's no way that the two are related." Suddenly Sheriff Funk's gaze dragged off into another direction, to the side of the house. "Wow, my hat's off to you, Mr. Paraday. That's a...*mighty* attractive woman."

Melvin glanced beyond the Sheriff. *What's wrong with her? She looks* — He wasn't sure. But Gwyneth stood in the yard on the side of the house. She wasn't walking or doing anything. She was just standing there, looking at them, her face drained of expression.

"Hi, Gwyneth!" Melvin called over. "This is Sheriff Funk. He just stopped by to see how we were doing."

Sheriff Funk nodded, tipped his hat.

But Gwyneth's expression—or lack of expression—didn't change. She remained standing there in the grass, barefoot, the lightest breeze ruffling the sun-dress about her preposterously perfect body. Dusk dragged the sun

down behind her, against the contours of her physique to bezel-sharp crispness. Even through the dress, Melvin's strangely zooming eyesight could make out details of her pubic tuft in that precious gap which existed at the joist of her thighs.

Her eyes were looking at them but...not really seeing them. That's the impression Melvin received.

"The, uh, the Chinese carry-out food's in the kitchen," Melvin called back to her. "I'll be right in to heat it back up."

Funk seemed less aware of Gwyneth's behavior and more centered merely on her body. His eyes flicked to Melvin, then to Gwyneth, then to Melvin, then back to Gwyneth.

"I congratulate you, Mr. Paraday. That is about the best-looking woman I have ever seen in my life, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Uh, no, not at all," Melvin replied. *God, why is she just standing there? Why can't she say something, or just walk away? She looks like she's in a trance!* "She's, um, she doesn't talk much. The artsy type, always into her own thoughts."

Funk came close to chuckling. "Any woman who looks *that* good and doesn't talk much? That's the ultimate woman. Your wife or girlfriend?"

Jeez... "Neither. She's my stepmother."

If Funk had been sipping coffee at that moment, he surely would've spat it across the yard.

"My father married her a few weeks ago," Melvin hastened, "and had her come up here with me because he's out of town. Plus, this area seemed like a good place for her to work on her art."

Finally, Gwyneth turned, her erect breasts excruciatingly defined by the descending sun. In her hand she limply held one of her bottles of Hershey's Syrup, the straw sticking out.

Then, very slowly, she walked away, almost as if she were drifting.

"An artist? You mean, like, a painter?" the Sheriff asked.

"She does mosaic work and mounts it on wooden plaques. Crosses, crucifixes, Christian symbols, that sort of thing."

"Really? My wife collects religious mosaics. Maybe I can...have a look at some of it sometime."

The conversation was degrading. Melvin suspected that the Sheriff's wife had no such interest at all. He was simply fishing for an excuse to see Gwyneth's bodacious body again. "Oh, sure. Stop by anytime," he said, unable to think of anything else. But then something *did* occur to him. The voice he'd heard. "Oh, Sheriff, by the way. Do you have anyone on your department named Nixon?"

Funk's brow flexed. "Nixon. No, I sure don't. Why do you ask?"

"It sounds silly, but just when you were pulling up, I thought I heard someone say the name. I thought maybe it was someone on your police radio."

Sheriff Funk shook his head, arms still crossed. "There hasn't been any radio traffic for the last hour." Funk raised a finger. "Of course, out here in the hills, voices can carry a long ways." He looked off the hill. "Might be someone down at the compound. I think I'll check now that I'm out here."

"I thought you said it was unoccupied."

"Well, what I mean is there's no *authorized* tenants. Every now and then, though, we'll get a few transients shacking up there. Low-lifes, you know? Bikers, fugitives. Might be someone like that down there whooping it up, and the voices carried up here."

Melvin doubted it but at least it was a consideration. "Yeah, I'll bet that was it." If anything, it had sounded more like the voice had issued from inside the house.

But how could that be?

"Oh, and I guess you already know that this deep in the county rural zone there's not much in the way of entertainment or stores," Funk informed him. He was clearly making small-talk now, clearly hoping that Gwyneth might reappear, give him a last gander at her wares. "But I guess you already found Herbster's Shopping Center down by the junction. You mentioned Chinese food, and that's the only place you could've gotten it this side of Rochester."

"Oh, right, the little strip mall," Melvin said. "So there's nothing closer going north?"

"No, sir, I'm afraid not. But there's a little grocery store there too, and a tavern, and a video rental. Oh, and a great little pizza place. Pretty much all you'll need if you're only staying a week or two."

"That's good to know, Sheriff," Melvin remarked, "thanks." He couldn't wipe the image of Gwyneth's nipples from his mind. Even when she was out of view, he could still see those nipples down to their last pores. *Jeez, I'm going to have to go jerk off again. This is crazy!*

Funk squinted past the side of the house again, disappointed. "Well, I best be on my way, Mr. Paraday. I hope you and your w—...er, your stepmother enjoy the scenic beauty and fresh air we've got to offer up here. I'm going to go check the old Epiphanite compound now, but if you need anything, or if you have any problems, give the sheriff's department a call and ask for me."

"I sure will, Sheriff. Thank you, and have a nice day," Melvin bid.

But just as Funk was turning to leave, a final question ignited. "Oh, Sheriff? Can I ask you something?"

"What's that, Mr. Paraday?"

"The murders you mentioned in 1977... Was the killer apprehended?"

Funk sternly shook his head. "Nope. He disappeared and never resurfaced. We have APB flags for him in every police-index computer in the country. We were able to ID him from his fingerprints left on a carving knife he used to cut...parts off a body on the kitchen table. His prints were previously on file because he did time in Maryland for grand larceny. He stole a bunch of camera equipment from a public broadcasting station, of all things."

Camera equipment, the words, for no apparent reason, impacted Melvin's mind.

"I'll never forget it," Funk went on. "I'd only been on the force a year then, and I was first on the scene. I *personally* lifted those prints off that knife, too, I'll tell you."

If they ID'd him, Melvin reasoned, *they must know his name.* "What was his name?"

"No, sir, I'll *never* forget that name. The worst murderer in the history of this fine county. Um-hmm. Something I want more than anything in the world would be to nab that sick psycho after all these years."

Melvin tried not to roll his eyes. "I'm sure, Sheriff. *What* did you say his name was?"

"D'arava was his name. D'arava."

Melvin looked at him blankly. "What was his first name?"

"Leonard."

The sun crept down on Sheriff Funk's back when he retreated to his cruiser and drove away.

"Leonard," Melvin whispered to himself. The cruiser's tires were crunching down the hill. His curiosity was what dismayed him more than anything else. What difference did the killer's name make? It was almost thirty years ago. Why had he felt so compelled to ask?

The oddity had impacted him as well. Yes, Leonard. *Gwyneth called me that name by mistake earlier today,* he couldn't help but remember.

But...so what? Lots of people were named Leonard. Leonard Nimoy. Elmore Leonard. Sugar Ray Leonard. It was just a coincidence.

Melvin went back in the house. He was actually getting hungry. "Gwyneth?" he called out. "I'm heating the food up now." He set the proverbial cardboard containers in the oven and turned up the heat. "Gwyneth?" A smirk felt sealed on his face. *Where is she now?* He looked in her bedroom, then checked the rest of the house.

No Gwyneth.

The floozy must still be outside, and it'll be dark soon, he thought. His aggravation climbed. How embarrassing! *Silly space cadet standing out there and not even saying hello to the cop! She looked like she was on drugs or something! That's just what we need the chief of the county sheriff's department to think!*

Before he forgot, though, he needed to jot down some more notes. Sheriff Funk had corroborated still more of the history of the house. *And now I even know the ax-murderer's name...*

But Melvin just stared when he sat down at the laptop, about to type in the data. There, at the bottom of the note file just under the last line he'd previously written, were these words typed cleanly in good old 12-point Arial type:

GIVE US OUR JUNK, LEONARD!

The screen stared back at him. Leonard rubbed his face, then shook his head.

"Leonard," he muttered. "What the hell is going on?"

He knew he didn't type that himself. *How did it get there?*

Next, he muttered, "Gwyneth..."

If I didn't type it, she did...and I KNOW I didn't type it, and today she even CALLED me Leonard...

He stood up quickly, grinding his teeth. He felt very, very determined and even a little mad, and these were rare emotions for Melvin.

Was she playing some kind of a joke on him?

Melvin had been the brunt of jokes his entire life, and he was getting *damn* tired of it.

"Gwyneth!" he bellowed. "Where are you...*damn it!* I want to know why you wrote this crap on my computer!"

His uncharacteristic bellow shuddered through the house. There was no response, of course, and when he searched every room again, there was no sign of her.

Of course.

Back in the kitchen, he turned his head, looked out the window. The old dog-pen could be seen, and the blades of grass appeared a fiery, shimmering orange from the sinking sun.

And there was Gwyneth, too, right there in the yard in front of the pens.

Suddenly the most abstract—as well as absurd—thought occurred to him. *Every time I look at Gwyneth, my mind sees her differently. It's like I'm looking through the eye of a film director...*

More macro-vision. Every detail came into the most severe focus, the molten light of the minute before dusk sweeping the grassy yard and caressing Gwyneth. He could see the diminutive veins in her feet, the costal groove of each rib beneath the dress fabric, the convolutions of her ears. He could see each individual cilia of her eyelashes, and he could even detect the imperceptible prominence of her cornea and the separate flecks of her emerald-and-ice-blue irises.

My God...

It was almost too surreal to look at. This magnification of details dizzied him. But even more shocking than the way he was seeing her...was what she was doing.

My God, he thought again.

Gwyneth was squatting over the plush grass between the house and the dog-pen. Her elegant fingers had hiked the dress up to her waist. Her back was arched and her knees were parted as widely as her joints would permit. This extremity of posture opened the beautiful furred pubis like the prettiest hot-house flower, petals impossibly cringing as they spread.

To put it in technical lexicon, she was aspirating the contents of her urinary bladder. And not so technically?

She was pissing like a fucking racehorse.

The index and middle finger of one hand were V'd, their pads pressed firmly to either side of the tea-rose-pink clitoral hood which not only bared the almond-sized clitoris itself (to dazzling detail) but raised the upper interior minus of the vaginal canal. More excruciating detail then: Melvin's supereal vision could even detect the tiny, tender metus of the opening of her urethra, a shining pink pin-hole.

Her urine arced out of her in a golden, ice-like cascade, the light of dusk filling the stream with roving facets of glints more beautiful than gem-dust.

The look on Gwyneth's face, as she continued to offer her piss to the earth, was an expression of angelic rapture.

Melvin's eyes darted up against their will, to his stepmother's mouth. The delectable tongue slowly slipped out and glazed the lips. Then the finger of her other hand floated upward to receive a portion of crystalline saliva. Just as slowly, the fingertip lowered, positioned itself precisely between the V'd fingertips of her other hand, and gently caressed the saliva over the clitoris, rubbing a lazy circle.

The sensation caused her toes to flex in the grass. Her stomach and thigh muscles tightened, and the gentle arc of urine lifted as if excited by the pleasures of its host.

Gwyneth's expression was now one of new-found bliss, her eyes closed, lips parted, her face upturned to the sky. When she'd finished urinating, she lowered herself to hands and knees, crawled forward. She looked as though she were in some reverent trance, as though she *worshiped* the ground beneath her. She kissed the damp grass, then ran her hands through the blades and brought them to her face.

Melvin's macro-vision switched off.

It was impossible for him to imagine the meaning behind what he'd just witnessed. All he knew was that it was...fucked up.

There's something wrong with her, it occurred to him. *She's a nut, she's crazy. She must have some kind of split personality or something. I'm going to have to tell Dad.*

The back door opened. Gwyneth strode into the kitchen, sipping her bottle of chocolate syrup. She seemed wistful, preoccupied, and particularly normal.

"Hi, Melvin. Is the Chinese food ready?"

Melvin stared at her, took a deep breath. "Are you all right?"

She set the bottle of Hershey's down, then bent over and looked in the oven. "Mmm, that smells good. What did you say?"

"I asked you if you're all right," he repeated very deliberately.

"I'm fine." She put on an oven mitt and began to take the containers out. "Why do you ask?"

Melvin cleared his throat. "I ask," he said, "because you've been acting very strange today."

Her eyes narrowed. "How so?"

"Well, let's see. You were walking around in the yard like a zombie when the cop was here, and when I introduced you, you didn't even say anything. You just stared."

Now she frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"When the cop was here about a half hour ago."

"What cop?"

Melvin let out a sharp sigh. "The cop! He was the chief of the county sheriff's department! You just saw me talking to him, but you acted like we weren't there, and a minute ago I look out the window and see you peeing on the grass! And then you rub your face in it! But you look at me like I'm batty when I ask you if you're all right!"

A long pause unreeled. "Melvin, I have no idea what just came out of your mouth. Cops? Peeing in the grass? Are you nuts?"

Melvin's frustration inched up. He didn't do well when he was frustrated. "No, Gwyneth, I am not nuts, but I think you are. Are you on drugs or something? Are you on some kind of medication?"

Gwyneth opened the box full of wedges of shrimp toast. "I'm starting to worry about you, Melvin. Your father told me you were a little odd, a little unbalanced, but he assured me you were functional."

"Don't try to make it look like *I'm* the one who's unbalanced!" he nearly shrieked. "And let me ask you something else! Why did you call me Leonard today?"

"Who's Leonard? I don't even know anybody named Leonard." She crunched into a piece of shrimp toast. "And I never called *you* Leonard, either. You need to calm down. Did you take a nap earlier, and have a bad dream?"

Melvin rubbed his eyes and ground his teeth. "No! I did not take a n—"

"Chill out, Melvin." Her voice was back to that cool, subtly elitist drone. "Relax. Your father explained everything to me about your...problems. You never developed the way most normal, healthy people develop. You're sheltered, you're shy, there's no common ground between your psychological makeup and the regular world. And this is okay. I'm okay, you're okay."

Melvin was outraged. "What are you talking about!"

"It's Freudian, Melvin. You have a tremendous intellectual capacity, so you must realize that."

"Freudian!"

"Yes, Melvin. It's Freudian. It's sexual." Now she was fingering through the Crispy Sesame Beef, searching for a big piece. "It all goes back to the sensorial indoctrination of our formative years. You're not emotionally evolved because you're sexually repressed. You're retentive instead of expulsive. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Your father told me all about it."

Melvin's face felt like boiling meat. "All about what?"

"That you've never been with a woman. You're a 33-year-old male virgin."

Now Melvin's eyes bugged out. *Oooooo, that PRICK! That BASTARD!* How could his own father embarrass him like this? She was

laying a bunch of silly California Dr. Phil psycho-babble on him, making him look ridiculous and out of control simply because he wasn't secure around members of the opposite sex! His father had reduced him to a pathetic pud!

"That's a lot of repression, Melvin. By your age? I don't want you to think that I'm being egotistical but I am in fact a very sexually provocative woman. I'm more beautiful than the typical social archetype. You and I in the same house together, alone, without your father's protective arm around you... Well, that's causing you to come a little unglued, that's all. You're frustrated because I'm sexually unavailable to you just as all women are, but due to our very close proximity right now... You're struggling. My sexuality is stressing you out and it's producing this side-effect. A cataclysm of symbols and fantasies."

Melvin's temples throbbed. He couldn't speak. She was out-psychologizing him, even though he was ten times smarter than her.

Now she was into the Triple Delight, plucking up a straw mushroom and a shrimp, talking as she chewed. "Your sexual frustration is projecting fantasies into your psyche. This police officer, for instance. There was no police officer but you thought there was because of what the police symbolize: the universal phallic symbol, the gun being the hard penis that can conquer all. And this reference to a person named Leonard. Obviously it's something you've consciously forgotten, probably from your adolescence or pre-adolescence. I'm sure there was some boy in junior high —some boy named Leonard—who was popular, charismatic, and handsome, the boy who made all those pretty little 13-year-old girls' hearts

go aflutter. The boy *you* wanted to be. And now, in your fantasy-syndrome, you think you hear me calling you Leonard."

Melvin had tears in his eyes. He sat down with a thud. When he objected—quite weakly now—his words came out as if he were being strangled: "What about you PISSING in the yard? I suppose I fantasized that too, right? It's some covert Freudian symbol resurfacing in the midst of my sexual inadequacy—"

Gwyneth clapped her hands together once. "Finally! You're understanding your own maladjustments! Your inability to achieve sexual release with a member of the opposite sex has turned you into a retentive personality type. You're *holding it all in.* So you fantasize seeing me—the object of your natural sexual impulse—*letting it all out.*"

Melvin rubbed his face, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. He'd never felt like a bigger loser in his life.

My God, his thoughts croaked. *Maybe she's right.*

Could this be? Could his perceptions have broken so completely from reality? *I've never been laid in my life,* he realized. *Could all that sexual repression really make me hallucinate?*

"Aw, don't be upset, Melvin," she offered, munching. "Self-revelation is a good thing. You're understanding more about yourself now, and it's my desirability that's the catalyst. This is all actually very positive."

Melvin began to sob.

"Melvin, Melvin, don't cry. You'll feel better once you've thought about it all, processed it into terms you can deal with." She thrust a carry-out box toward him. "Here, have a dumpling."

He looked up, red-faced. "I don't want a fuckin' dumpling. I know I'm not hallucinating. I know none of this is some fantasy projection. Because I KNOW—beyond all certainty—that I did not write that on my laptop."

Gwyneth looked bewildered. "Write *what* on your laptop?"

"That name. Leonard. I'm one-hundred-percent positive that I didn't write it. So that means you did."

She rolled her eyes. "Come on, Melvin. Show me."

He picked himself up and walked over to the pantry with her. He pointed. "There. Look on the screen. You know what's there because you wrote it."

His eyes followed his finger, then his knees went weak and he staggered out of the room, moaning.

The laptop screen was blank.

(IV)

Melvin slept fitfully in his back bedroom. Was a cold coming on? A headache cut into the front of his brain just above his eyes, and his throat felt rough. He figured the best way to process the frustrating scene with Gwyneth was to not process it at all. *Just forget about it and go to sleep*, he drowsily ordered himself. And that's what he tried to do.

Snippets of noise from dreams kept waking him. He *knew* they were from dreams, however, because each time, once his eyes were opened, he found himself staring into total silence. The dream-noises had come along in an

annoying array: soft footsteps, the sound of earth being shoveled, dogs barking.

A slice of moonlight cut into the room and somehow made it seem larger. When he woke next, he dimly recalled a gush of dream-fragments:

A very thin girl in nothing but a man's long T-shirt lying unconscious or dead on the living room floor.

A tall, effeminate-looking black man sitting on a ratty couch, dressed in an atrocious tan leisure suit and a chocolate-brown silk shirt, the collar sticking up.

A bag of groceries on a table, containing mostly cans of Giant-brand dog food.

A garishly lit room with plastic drop cloths on the floor.

This time when he woke up, he frowned. *What was that all about?* Now the sore throat raged, and he was sweating. *Not the flu again!* He seemed to get it once or twice a year for as long as he could remember. His fatigue pressed down on him like a heretic being squashed by rocks. *Oh, jeez, just go to sleep!* His travel clock on the nightstand read 2:07 a.m.

He drifted off yet again. This time the dream wasn't a fragment—it unreeled. He dreamed he was walking choppily through the house, like a strip of film with every other frame spliced out. He knew it was the same house even though it was clearly different. Stains blotched the wallpaper and seedy, water-damaged carpet. He lurched into the kitchen and found it filled with old white-enameled appliances from the '50s or '60s. He looked out the window through some strange visual grain like movies shot on 16 millimeter and spied three dogs—a mutt, a Collie and a German Shepard—

mange-flecked, tongues lolling as they slept under crisp moonlight. More jerky steps propelled him into the living room and its nearly rotten couch. Curious crusty splotches stained the threadbare cushions. Several tiny plastic bags littered the floor, plus a flickering candle in a clunky pewter holder. A lamp stood on a cigarette-burned end table, its shade stained and crooked, its light hovering in a strange orange gloom. In the corner a cockroach feasted on a bit of something unknown.

When voices issued from the hallway which led to the bedrooms, Melvin suddenly couldn't move, as though he were indeed in a piece of film and the projector had been paused.

"I...guess that's a print," came a discouraged male voice.

Then a huskier one: "He called me a, a, a dago moron whop motherfucker."

But the next voice was shrill and decidedly female, backed by a whine of outrage. "We were about to fire up and the little fucker barges in here trying to eat us, and the bag of junk was on the floor and he ate it! He ate the candles too!"

The final noise Melvin heard was not a human voice but a feisty chortling.

Is that...a pig? he wondered.

But the noise, the voices, and the decomposing house were all a dream—Melvin realized that even as he stood in the middle of it.

"Hey, buddy..."

The first male voice again. Melvin's dream-paralysis released him. With some trepidation, he turned toward the hall whose opening stood like an

oblong, black maw. The other voices had drifted from the same direction but they'd sounded more distant. This voice, however...

It sounded *right there.*

"Here," it said next. "If you let yourself, you can see us."

Creep me out, Melvin thought. He stood now clenched in a very genuine fear. *Muh-muh-muh-maybe this isn't a dream...*

"It's one thing becoming something else." The voice rang in an etched clarity. "Think about this, this point I'm about to make. It's all fucked up but it also makes perfect sense. This: An image in a piece of film is like a ghost."

Melvin stared at the hall's opening. The burned-orange light from the dim lamp seemed to darken, and the grain-flecked blackness before him seemed to very slowly swirl.

The voice sounded confident, nonchalant. "Close your eyes and turn your head to the right."

Melvin did so.

"Now, open your eyes."

Again, Melvin did so, and shouted once. In the entrance to the kitchen a wan and very emaciated brunette woman stood. Naked, slat-ribbed, pale as cream. She looked back at him with black, bottomless eyes. From one hand dangled a black Teflon frying pan.

"That's him?" she asked and smirked.

The male voice again: "Close your eyes and look to the left."

Melvin, this time, was less enthused to do so but he did anyway, his fear somehow releasing a strange masochistic adrenalin.

"Open."

Melvin shouted louder, twice. This time it was a blonde. She too was naked, and if anything, even more emaciated than the brunette. She sat indecorously leg-spread on the ratty couch. Strings of needle-marks like lines of black pepper coursed over her bony feet, up and down the insides of her arms and thighs. Lanky blond hair hung in a dirty tangle as she looked down intently on some task. Virtually no fat existed on the corpse-like wax-paper body. Stained teeth were gnashed behind thin, bloodless lips as she daintily tried to empty a hypodermic needle into a wormlike blue abdominal vein.

"Oh, damn it, damn it," she sobbed in the most desperate frustration. "All my veins are collapsed. I don't have any good ones left anymore! I can't fire up!"

Melvin closed his eyes again, shuddering. The only relief from this horrific, dark-orange world he'd stepped in was just that: closing his eyes.

He knew what the next instruction would be.

"Keep your eyes closed and turn your head towards me."

"Nuh-nuh—no," Melvin braved, eyes squeezed shut. "I'm not going to."

Two small, bony, and very, very cold hands pressed against his cheeks from behind and turned his head.

"Open."

Fingertips now, thin as a skeleton's, gingerly pried open his eyelids.

A thin gawky man in his mid-'30s stood in the darkness of the hall's mouth. He wore jeans, sneakers, and a T-shirt that read VAN DER GRAAF

GENERATOR. He had hair like Carrot Top (only it was dark brown), stooped shoulders, and a neck that was, if anything, longer than Melvin's.

He's a geek... Just like me!

There were several details, though, that Melvin lacked. For one, Melvin didn't have a fire-ax resting against his shoulder, and, two, he wasn't spattered in blood.

"Remember. An image in a piece of film is like a ghost. I can't say it outright—I'm not allowed. You have to use your brain, but you're pretty smart, aren't you?"

Melvin gulped and nodded.

"Good," the man said. "Greener pastures are closer than you think."

Melvin frowned in spite of his fear. "*What?*"

"Close your eyes."

Melvin did so.

Hollow silence now. Melvin wasn't sure how long he stood there with his eyes closed. Probably many minutes. What he dreaded more than anything —anything thus far in his life, perhaps—was the command to open his eyes again.

But the command never came.

When he finally did re-open them, he found himself standing in the living room—the *real* living room of today, with new paint, new carpet, and brand-new tacky Wal-Mart furniture. The smoldering orange light was gone, replaced by the meager and very normal light from the current table-side lamp.

The knock-kneed, gawky phantom standing at the end of the hall was gone, too.

"My God," Melvin whispered to himself. "That was one creepy dream." But creepier still: he'd obviously sleepwalked out here to have it. *It's this flu*, he reminded himself, *this fever.* He remembered hallucinating once before, when he was a child. He'd seen grooves on the bedroom wall, and insects ran up and down the grooves. It was when he'd been sick in bed for several days, with a temperature. *Just a hallucination,* Melvin felt confident, *like that time when I was little*. He'd had a serious flu then, too.

This all made sense, of course. However, Melvin didn't readily acknowledge to himself that he felt fine now. No sore throat, no headache, no fever.

The geek-wraith's words fluttered in the back of his mind. *Greener pastures are closer than you think,* and as he recited the words back to himself he found himself gazing uncannily at the bargain-basement painting hanging over the couch.

Hills and vibrant green fields...and a pasture.

Coincidence, he thought after a pause.

Melvin stiffened from a start. Something had clattered in the kitchen. Instead of feeling scared, he felt foolish: standing in the living room in the middle of the night in only a T-shirt and Fruit o' the Looms.

"Hi, Melvin," a very brazenly naked Gwyneth offered when he peeked into the kitchen. "What are you doing up this late?"

"I..." His vision locked—as it always did now—on the plush, raving body. The kitchen light was out; it was the refrigerator light, instead, that lit

every detail of Gwyneth as she stood bent over before the opened door. Her breasts hung, nipples depending. Her angel-food-cake-white buttocks jutted elegantly. She was reaching in to withdraw one of the boxes of carry-out Chinese.

"I had a screwy dream," Melvin finally said.

"Really? So did I." She stood erect now, examining the box's contents. The fridge light cast her bosom as a magnificent bas-relief of orbicular white and black. Her belly button was a beautiful little black hole, her pubic thatch glowing like a nest of butterscotch syrup spun to floss.

Melvin's penis jolted in his shorts to a complete spontaneous erection.

"I dreamed I was flying a kite in a pasture," she said.

A pasture. *Great,* he thought. "What's so screwy about that?"

"In my other hand I was carrying a bucket."

"A bucket?"

"Yes, just a regular old metal pail," she said. She fingered out a glazed chunk of Crispy Sesame Chicken. "What was your dream?"

Melvin gulped, feeling dismal. "Oh, nothing. It was stupid."

"God, I love left-over Chinese food. Want some?"

"Uh, no." He stood with his hands covering his crotch, hoping she hadn't noticed but doubting that that was the case. "I'm not really hungry."

She looked right back at him, her body poised, hip cocked, breasts shouting in their image. She licked the sweet glaze off her finger very slowly, and Melvin thought, *I'd sell my soul for her finger to be my dick...*

The tease ended. She leaned over again, replaced the box, and as she did so the tiniest smidgen of her pubic tuft could be seen peeking out of her

rump. She grabbed a bottle of Hershey's and stuck a straw in it, began to sip.

"Isn't that a little rich?" he asked, pursing his lips.

"I have low blood-sugar. Besides, it's delicious."

"Aren't you afraid you'll get fat?"

She shook her head. "I have high-metabolism. I drink a couple of these a day and don't gain an ounce."

The idea of all that syrup... It made Melvin queasy.

She was back to her self-absorbed, cool drone of voice: "In the morning I'm going to start a new mosaic."

"With the bird bones you found?" Melvin asked because maintaining some facsimile of discourse would keep the image of her body there for a moment more.

"Yes. Plus I'm going to search for more in the woods." Her body fell into a pillowy shadow when she closed the refrigerator door. "It's this place... It's the fuel for my artistry. I feel like Monet at Giverny. I feel like Michelangelo painting the hand of God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel."

If Melvin's erection hadn't been burning so intensely, he would've collapsed to his knees in laughter.

"I'm glad you're feeling better than you were earlier," she had to add. "You were very upset."

Melvin smirked but just said, "Oh, I'm fine now," because it was so much easier.

"Goodnight," the low drone spake. She drifted back down the hall, slurping her chocolate syrup.

I don't even like her, Melvin realized, outraged by his erection. Its absolute turgidity made him feel a hypocrite. He tried to think it away but...no dice.

Fatigue drooped his shoulders. He meant to return immediately to bed but found himself turned around in the living room, thinking of the grim hallucinations.

An image in a piece of film is like a ghost, he recalled the specter's words. Stupid...but weird. Leonard the murderer had been a "film"-maker, and now he was purportedly a ghost. But over time, the human instinct to create rumors would place a ghost in *any* house where a murder had been committed. It was Melvin's subconscious, he knew, processing the rumors of the house being haunted, then amalgamating the other things he'd learned about the place, and then manufacturing the "ghost," generating a preconceived image of Leonard D'arava, the ax-murderer. *That's all,* he thought. *Nothing really scary about any of it. It's all cerebro-chemical science. It's brain-hormone and synaptic reactivity—the process of human consciousness and its capability to incite imagination.*

He was staring at the picture above the couch, the pasture. *Greener pastures are closer than you think...* He lifted the picture off the wall—unsure of the roots of the impulse to do so—and saw that it covered a hole in the wall.

An ugly smell came out. Melvin re-hung the picture and went back to bed.

The grainy darkness converged. When he closed his eyes, his erection seemed to throb harder in some libidinal objection. It, like the hallucination of Leonard—was making a demand of its own. He tried to blacken his mind, to draw a heavy drape across the incessant image of Gwyneth naked and all her feminine details magnified. The harder he squeezed his eyes shut, the more closely he glimpsed each "part" of her, a camera zooming down on each separate and delectable piece of candy in the box.

I don't even like her! Why is my mind forcing me to beat off to her image? Why not Pamela Anderson? Why not Paris Hilton? Or—ooo!—the girl in Lifeforce? (Bad movie. Great body!) He felt weak, disgusted with himself when he realized he was pulling his shorts off. He could imagine how he looked now: spread-eagled on the bed in the middle of the night, underpants gone, face twisted up like Shemp's as he stroked his penis. The harder he squeezed his eyes shut, the more brightly he saw Gwyneth's body. His testicles jumped up like yo-yo's. The kaleidoscope of sexual parts spun round and round, then stopped:

On the dainty pink fur-rimmed vulva plumped up with desire.

"Ooooooooooooo," Melvin moaned.

His ejaculation felt like a long and very fat piece of cooked spaghetti being drawn out of his pee-hole. When his orgasm abated, his hand fell away, his balls dropped to his buttcrack, and he wheezed in a distended breath. In the post-climactic bliss, he truly couldn't move.

When he opened his eyes, Gwyneth was standing next to the bed, looking down at him.

Melvin's heart probably literally stopped for several seconds.

"What are you doing in here!" he bellowed.

She'd been sipping her chocolate syrup through the straw while she watched, but then she lowered the bottle, brought a finger to her lips, and replied: "Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

She placed a very soft and very warm white hand on his chest and got down on her knees. She was looking right at his spent penis and the impressive ten-inch line of sperm on his belly, and the look in her eyes could've been the look in a wino's eyes when spying a bottle of booze.

She took the straw out of her syrup bottle.

She stuck one end in her mouth.

She lowered the other end to Melvin's belly.

And—

"Sssssslllllllllluuuuuuuuurrrrrp..."

—sucked up all the semen.

Then she stood up very slowly and left the room.

This act comprised the official end to Melvin's first day in the Vinchetti house.

PART THREE

(I)

Melvin wakened close to noon. He noticed no sign of flu, cold, or sore throat. *How did I sleep so late?* he wondered when he looked first at the sun

blazing high in his window and then the clock again.

But... He stretched and yawned. *I feel great!*

He felt great, at least, for a few seconds, then the recollection of everything that happened to him last night hit him on the top of the head like multiple flower pots.

Sheriff Funk identifying the Vinchetti-house's killer as a man named "Leonard."

Gwyneth calling Melvin "Leonard."

Gwyneth *denying* calling Melvin "Leonard."

The name "Leonard" on his laptop.

Gwyneth pissing in the yard and rubbing the piss on her face.

Gwyneth *denying* pissing in the yard and rubbing the piss on her face.

Gwyneth looking right at Sheriff Funk when he came to the house.

Gwyneth *denying* that Sheriff Funk had come to the house.

Melvin sleepwalking into the living room.

Melvin *hallucinating* in the living room.

Melvin masturbating, only to have his sperm sucked off his stomach with a plastic straw.

Whew!

All of this, by anyone's standards, would constitute a *full* day.

Melvin sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. *Oh, man...* Unsocialized nerd notwithstanding, Melvin was possessed of far higher than average intellect. The answer to this dilemma could only be found in one of the two following possibilities.

One, he thought, *Gwyneth has a serious psychiatric problem, or...*

Two, I have a serious psychiatric problem.

Melvin considered that probably the worst thing for him to do was seek the answer immediately. *I'm pretty sure I'm not screwed up in the head, so... If it's Gwyneth, I should be able to make that determination soon.*

Or: *Time will tell...*

Melvin showered and dressed quickly, then went to find Gwyneth when he noticed an oddity. Dirty footprints had been tracked down the hall all the way back to the back door in the kitchen. *What a mess!*

He glanced out the kitchen window into the back yard and saw—

What the hell did that floozy do!

—a hole.

A shovel lay in the grass next to a mound of earth next to where the hole had been dug. And the hole appeared to be on the exact spot where Melvin had seen—or had *thought* he'd seen—Gwyneth urinating with gusto.

"Gwyyyyyyyyyyyynnnnnnneth!" he shouted.

"I'm back here," the cool, detached voice replied.

Melvin wasn't happy. He stomped back to the bedroom she'd converted to a work room, barged right in—

And nearly groaned at the image.

No, Gwyneth wasn't naked now; she was fully dressed in a pistachio-green-satin see-through bra and panties.

The impact of this image—and its suddenness—distracted Melvin as effectively as if a tree had fallen on the house at that same moment.

Melvin began to stir quite unwillingly below the belt.

"So what were you yelling about, Melvin?" she asked. She wasn't looking at him. Instead, she worked in an extreme focus on the project at hand: a cruciform mosaic on a shield-shaped veneered wooden plaque. On the table before her lay assorted tools: tweezers, a small hammer, a magnifying glass, assorted files and squares of emery cloth, assorted tubes of glue, laquer, and epoxy, and a hand-held electric grinder with a conical grinding stone on its end. The tools, evidently, of her trade. A stinky clove cigarette burned in an ashtray, next to which stood a bottle of Hershey's.

"Huh?" she said.

Melvin blinked, those green-satin-covered tits standing out on her chest like monuments. "What?"

Finally she looked up, exasperated. "Melvin! Stop being a space cadet! A minute ago you shouted my name at the top of your lungs. Is something wrong?"

This was useless. Now his instincts were forcing him to gaze at her bare legs, crossed at the ankles, under the table. "Oh, yeah," he finally managed, covering his crotch with his hands. "Did you dig that hole in the back yard?"

The question begged sarcasm. "No, Melvin. It was the good fairies who dug the hole. They were looking for the Leprechaun's gold."

Jeez. "Well, you tracked the dirt back into the house. The guy who rented us this place is my boss's brother. If the house if a mess when we leave, I could get in trouble."

Her bare, creamy shoulders shrugged. "It won't be a mess when we leave, because you'll clean it up."

"Oh, that's fair. You dig the hole and track dirt through the house, and I clean it up."

Gwyneth finally stopped what she was doing and looked at him. Sternly. "Melvin. You know I'm here as a favor to *you*. Your father knows that this article you're writing about houses in upstate New York is important, but he also knows that you're not capable of being on your own for too long—"

"Oh, come on!"

"You're too shy, you're too sheltered, and you're too insecure to talk to people. So I agreed to come up here, too, and keep an eye on you."

"That's ridiculous!" Melvin nearly raged.

"So that's the deal, and, after all, I *am* your stepmother. You don't want me to call your father and give him a bad report."

Melvin wanted to punch the wall. *She's got me sounding like the biggest invalid on earth! I'm a little shy! So what? I'm not a little kid who needs a baby-sitter!*

She diverted her attention back to her work. "It won't take you more than a half hour to fill in that hole and vacuum the house."

Great. Now I'm the maid.

"Let's not forget what we're doing up here. I'm here to work on my art in a new creative environment, and you're here to work on your article." She paused, tweezing a bone fragment onto a layer of glue. "How's your article coming by the way?"

"Uh, fine," he murmured. He couldn't tell her he'd barely worked on it at all. He couldn't tell her he'd spent more time jerking off than writing his article. "It's going better than I expected."

"Good, Melvin," she said as a teacher would say to a toddler in kindergarten when he'd finished his finger painting.

He took one rueful last glance at Gwyneth's breasts. "Guess I'll be getting back to it now."

She looked up again. Sternly. "You mean *after* you go get our lunch, right?"

"But there's still leftover Chinese."

"Melvin, I ate what was left for *breakfast.* Because I didn't sleep till *noon.* Now be a sweetheart and go get us something good. Go to pick up some burgers and fries."

"There aren't any fast food places up here," he complained. "I'd have to drive almost all the way to Rochester!"

"Thanks for being such a good sport, Melvin."

Melvin sighed. *Housemaid AND delivery boy. See Spot run...*

Gwyneth unconsciously pulled up her bra straps. The gesture elucidated her breasts to a spectacular effect. "Oh, and don't fill the hole back in yet. There might still be more cool stuff in it."

Cool stuff? Melvin thought. *In a hole in the ground?* "What's the big deal with this hole?"

Her eyes lit up. "Look what I found," and she reached into a small cardboard box and withdrew an animal skull. It was about the size of a melon. "It's perfect. The perfect hue for my next mosaic."

Melvin's frown was rich. "An animal skull? How can you make a mosaic out of that? It's too big."

"Not with the skull itself, silly." She hefted the hammer. "I'm going to smash it up into bits and use the pieces."

Melvin shook his head. *What a weirdo. But at least she's got great tits.* "Oh, I wanted to ask you something," he said, remembering Gwyneth's job with the straw. "Did you come into my room last night?"

She threw a smirk at him. "No, Melvin, I did *not* come into your room last night."

The look on her face seemed convincing. *I guess I dreamed that too...*

A brief anger flared. "And don't you dare be playing that damn radio of yours again tonight. It kept waking me up! That's rude, Melvin. What *is* that shit you were listening to? Barry Richards, the home of the heavy, heavy head? What the *hell* is that? And who in God's name is *Barry Richards?*"

Melvin's eyes crossed at her. "I have no idea on earth what you're talking about. I don't know anybody named Barry Richards, and I didn't even *bring* a radio."

Now her smirk signaled disbelief. "Well, it must be some music download on your computer, or some radio-internet thing."

Melvin remained firm. "I don't know what you're talk—"

"Melvin!" she abruptly yelled. "Stop being so weird! There was a radio station playing last night! It wasn't me so it had to be you! So don't play it tonight! Can you handle that? Is that too complicated for you?" Her hands gestured at the pile of junk before her on the table. "I have important *work* to do here! So go get our fucking lunch! And don't play that fucking radio again tonight! And quit *bugging* me!"

Ah, so I'M the one being weird, Melvin thought uselessly. *You're the one who walks around naked and drinks chocolate sauce with a straw. You're the one who pees in the grass and digs holes in the yard. And you're the one sitting there with an ANIMAL SKULL ON THE TABLE! But I'm the one who's weird.*

"Okay," he said.

The day was ruined. Melvin figured the only way to salvage something good out of it would be to masturbate in the bathroom in grand style. He was about to leave when she said, "What do you think this is?"

"Huh?"

She was holding the skull up now, looking at it with inquisitiveness. "What kind of skull?"

There wasn't anything in the entire world that Melvin could've cared less about. "I don't know. Looks too big to be a racoon or possum. Dog skull, maybe."

Her eyes held fast to it. Her voice reverted to its usual cool drone: "Or maybe a pig."

(II)

Melvin did indeed masturbate in the bathroom before he left, in grand style. It was a frenzied, nearly maddening release full of angst and resentment. In his mind he saw himself slapping her down. Suddenly Melvin was a big decked-out black-rappin' thug-life lovin' pimp. His name

would be Big Melvy P., or maybe Rap Daddy M. Who is 2 Kool 4 U. Melvin made the scene and if you fucked with him he'd bust a cap in your ass with his AK. Yes sir, Rap Daddy M. could BUST a move, and of course, the hottest bitches in town all lined up to work the street for him, and his top-drawer ho was Gwyneth and, see, she'd been holdin' out on him but Rap Daddy M. was wise to *that* shit, man, so he lay down some *hard* pimp-hand 'fo he grabbed hisself some hang-time on duh monkey. Her big bodacious white-bitch tits jiggled when his big black hand *cracked* her right across her lily-white face. "I slap you UP, bitch!" his terrifying voice thundered. "Ain't none of my ho's holds out on Rap Daddy M., ya dig?" CRACK! Her tits jiggled again, nipples sticking out like fucking spark plugs. "I've been a bad girl, Rap Daddy M.!" she squealed on her knees before him. "I need some lovin' like only Rap Daddy M. can lay down! Gimme some'a that big licorice stick!" and then those killer white thighs were divaricated before him, butterscotch quiff all hot and ready. Who's duh MAN? Shit-yeah! Uh-HUH!

The image provided an outstanding orgasm, the residue of which Melvin anxiously deposited into the crotch of a pair of her panties he'd found in the hamper in the bathroom. *There, how do you like that, bitch? Call me a weirdo? Call me shy and sheltered and insecure? Make fun of ME? Well, there. How do you like that?*

Melvin veritably *creamed* the panties—a beautiful frilly shade of noon-blue, by the way—and chucked them back in the hamper. Then he zipped back up and washed his hands, and—

The aftermath of the event caused him to reflect. He looked hard at himself in the mirror, and realized: *That was...uncharacteristic?* Not masturbating, which he did excessively, but the mental images he'd summoned. Melvin was not a violent person. He abhorred violence of any kind, and had never found it to be erotic or stimulating in any way. *So why did I just have the best orgasm of my life while fantasizing that I was slapping Gwyneth silly?*

It was a disturbing consideration.

Aw, I was just mad 'cos she's a dizzy bitch, he blew it off and left the bathroom. Something else occurred to him, though.

Something he wanted to check before he went to get lunch.

In the pantry, he looked on his laptop. He didn't have any music downloads on it but sometimes he did listen to internet radio while online. *Was I online yesterday?* He couldn't remember. *Maybe I forgot to log off*, but when he checked, he saw that he hadn't.

Hmmm.

There'd been no radio on last night, no weird music. *She really is off her rocker*, Melvin decided. To satisfy his curiosity, he quickly logged online, checked his browser, and saw that he hadn't gone to any internet radio sites in over a week. Then he ran a search for Barry Richards and clicked the first page that came up, to discover that a disk jockey named Barry Richards made some minor notoriety with on a Maryland radio station called WHMC (the heart of Montgomery County), 1150 on the AM dial. Richards was thought of as a progenitor shock-jock, calling himself "The Boss of Sauce." He's also credited as a maverick of sorts by promoting controversial acts

such as Blue Cheer, Pentagram, Bloodrock and Alice Cooper, in the late '60s. In 1968, he also booked Led Zeppelin into an obscure high school community center, insisting that the group would soon become the biggest band in the history of music since the Beatles and was laughed at when he could only sell 50 tickets to the show. Two years later, when Led Zeppelin had become the biggest band in the history of music since the Beatles, Richards booked them again with local hard-rock outfit Sir Lord Baltimore. Zeppelin performed dismally even as their brand-new single "Whole Lotta Love" hit number one on the charts, and Sir Lord Baltimore blew them off the stage. As for the station, WHMC remains a legendary footnote as one of the nation's first "progressive" radio stations, and was taglined, "The home of the heavy, heavy head." After multiple FCC violations, they went off the air in 1977.

Barry Richards, Melvin rolled the name over in his mind. *The home of the heavy, heavy head?* Gwyneth had just said that to him, hadn't she? It must have been something she'd heard elsewhere. Then Melvin considered something further: *Maybe she's slipping some vodka into that ridiculous chocolate sauce juice of hers.* Hey, it was a thought.

Melvin made doubly sure to log off the internet and shut the laptop down. Who knew? Maybe some audio pop-up had come on the computer last night, and that's what Gwyneth had heard.

Five minutes later, he was driving Dad's Hummer away from the house, heading north. *I feel...much better all of a sudden,* he thought, eyes wide behind the wheel, the gorgeous countryside unreeling before him. The high sun, blue sky, and deliriously green hills therapized his mood more

effectively than a couple of Prozacs. It almost seemed the minute he left the house his head had been cleared of all the anguish, illogic, and nonsense that had hounded him for the last 24 hours.

He drove for a full hour without a single sign of civilization. He should be getting close to the outskirts of the Rochester area, or at least he thought so. *What is with this place? There's NOTHING out here.* No shopping centers, no strip malls. He didn't even see one house for all that distance. And of course no fast food joints for Gwyneth's lunch.

Eventually he turned around. *There's no way I'm driving all the way to Lake Ontario just so Gwyneth can have a damn Big Bruford Burger with fries!* But the only place he knew he could get food was same shopping center he'd gotten the Chinese at. *Sheriff Funk said there was a pizza place there, too,* he recalled. Heading south again, he dialed Gwyneth's cell phone from his own. It rang several times with no pickup. *Jesus, she's not even there now! Probably out in the yard digging in that hole again...* Just when he expected the voice mail message to come on, a female voice answered, "Hello? Is this Rocco? We're dying up here, Rocco."

Melvin winced. It clearly wasn't Gwyneth's voice. Immediately he thought, *I dialed the wrong number,* but...

What did she say?

"Did you say you're *dying?*"

The female voice sounded tiny, exhausted. "Please bring our junk. And we don't have anything to eat, either, and neither do the dogs. If we don't croak stringing out we'll starve to death."

Melvin remained silent, cogitating. *Wow. When I dial a wrong number, I dial a WRONG NUMBER...* "I'm sorry, I dialed your number by mistake," he said, "but it sounds like you need help..."

"We don't need help, we need junk!"

Melvin stared at the open road.

Another woman's voice could be heard in the background, jabbering something. Did he hear dogs barking? He heard something else too: a whining chortle...

Then she said, "You're not Rocco! Leonard, is that you?"

Melvin severed the connection, eyes opened so wide he could feel their surface going dry.

Calm down, calm down. His mind ticked. *No big deal, it's just another coincidence. I dialed the wrong number and it happened to be a bunch of mentally ill people, and they just happened to know someone named Leonard. Lots of people are named Leonard...*

Leonard Nimoy. Elmore Leonard. Sugar Ray Leonard...

He drove a while to regain some composure, then much more carefully dialed Gwyneth's cell. After one ring, he got a recording of her droning, pretentious tone: "This is Gwyneth, I'm busy creating important works of art, so leave a message..."

Melvin's frown was incised and tense. He wanted to suggest that her first gallery opening could appropriately be held in the back of a garbage truck, but...he didn't. Instead, he said, "I couldn't find a fast food place so I'm heading back. There's no fast food out here so it's going to have to be more

Chinese or pizza. Call me back and let me know which," and then he hung up in self-contained disgust.

An hour up and then an hour back and now another 45 minutes to the pizza place and another 45 minutes back—just for lunch. *I'm blowing the whole day for my father's nutty wife. How am I ever going to get my article written?*

His mood was spoiled already.

He drove all the way back down the county highway. His ass hurt from sitting in the seat for so long. A half mile up the road, he spied a hitchhiker going his way. It was a girl in shorts and a white top, slim, long dark hair. *Pick her up, pick her up!* he yelled at himself. Melvin, being the shy type, did not pick up hitchhikers for the simple reason that he was too unsocialized to know what to say to them. With all too much detail, then, he remembered the coolly cruel things Gwyneth had said to him yesterday: *Your father explained everything to me about your...problems. You never developed the way most normal, healthy people develop. You're sheltered, you're shy, there's no common ground between your psychological makeup and the regular world...* Then:

I'll show her, he determined. *No common ground with the regular world, huh?*

Melvin decided to pick up the hitchhiker.

From afar, she looked good, and closer up?

Not so good.

It was Squirrelly.

He rolled down the window and pulled up next to her. "Hi, Squirrelly! Remember me?"

"Oh, fuck yeah sure, hi!" She seemed elated that he'd stopped. She hopped in: dirty, corpse-white, and dull-eyed...but perky as ever. "Oh, shit man, man, thanks for the ride. Lemme tell ya, it is a motherfuckin' BITCH trying to get a ride on this bumfuck road."

"So how have you been?" Melvin asked because, well, it seemed appropriate to field an interest in her well-being, and what made him feel terrific was that he didn't feel the least bit nervous picking her up and talking to her. Better still, she was talking back to him!

"Me? Oh, man, yesterday I was stringing so bad I threw up all that great Chinese food you gave me, then Chopper and his boys show up and I wound up OD-ing on *some* fuckin' shit he called an Eight Ball, man, I don't know *what* the fuck it was but it wasn't no Eight Ball, and then Chopper got all pissed off and punched me in the stomach 'cos I passed out when he was cornholing me, and then I had a nightmare that the devil was roasting me in a big-ass brick oven..but, shit, man, I'm doing okay. How about you?"

"Oh, I'm fine, Squirrelly." Melvin got back on the highway. "Gee, it's really good to see you."

She looked at him cock-eyed. "It...*is?*" She scratched her head, and a few flakes of dandruff fell. "Oh, well, yeah man, it's really good to see you, too. Shit, yeah, okay, yeah I know, you must want another blowjob like yesterday so—oh, shit, well, I didn't really quite give ya one 'cos you came in your pants, but yeah, shit, man, yeah, I'll blow you for, like, twenty bucks?" Her eyes looked dully hopeful. "Or maybe, like, even forty!"

Melvin was waylaid. It didn't matter that she was a raddled, drug-addicted prostitute. He was talking to her, he was *interacting.* And it was easy!

The shitty day was getting better again. *She's offering oral sex for money and, given the benefit of her obvious experience, she probably does it with some considerable proficiency.* And there was no way he'd come too soon this time. He'd had four or five orgasms in the last 24 hours! "That would be great, Squirrelly, but...can I ask you something first?"

"Fuck, yeah, man." She scratched her crotch through the dirty cutoff jeans. "What?"

It had all clicked in Melvin's mind just that second. "Remember yesterday when you were telling me about your sister?"

"Oh, yeah, man, Spooky. Man, they cut her fuckin' arms off, man, Vinchetti's people, and used her for kinks and scats. Fucked up shit, man. They were a bunch'a SICK motherfuckers, and then they probably snuffed her out."

"Yes, yes, and that's all very tragic, but didn't you say something like your sister stayed in the house I'm renting? And she heard something on the radio?"

"Yeah, sure. They took her up there for a flick like over five fuckin' years ago before she disappeared. A couple of Vinchetti's jobbers. Man, these were hardcore motherfuckers Vinch had doing this shit but Spooky said they were all *scared shitless* after one night in that fuckin' house. They kept hearing this weird music from a long time ago, some radio station from the '70s but this was in the fuckin' '90s, man. And there wasn't a radio in the house anyfuckingwhere."

Melvin's sense of curiosity played with that one. *Hmmm.*

"'Cos it was in the '70s when that kid went nuts up there and killed everybody with an ax. Killed two junkie flick chicks and two of Vinchetti's most balls-to-the-wall hit men. Chopped 'em up like they were a pile of sticks. And then the guy disappeared."

More cogitation. "And your sister said she saw a ghost?"

"They all did, shit. And not a ghost, ghosts, man. They'd see 'em walking around and hear them talking, the chicks that got chopped up."

How could he not remember his nightmare last night? "How many women—er, chicks? Was it two?"

"Yeah, man, I think it was. And, shit, they wrote shit on the walls or windows or some shit," Spooky said.

And were they now writing "shit" on Melvin's laptop?

Squirrelly lurched forward intently, placed a warm, dirty hand on Melvin's thigh. Now some mode of excitement was trying to glimmer through the pallid glaze in her eyes. "Shit, man, why you askin' me this shit? Have you seen 'em, too?"

Melvin had difficulty calculating an answer. *I do not believe in ghosts,* he affirmed to himself. *Ghosts are creations of human fancy and the primordial instinct to tell stories and make one appear more interesting by making the story sound more interesting. Ghosts are a contradiction of logic and all legitimate scientific theory.* "Well," he said, "some weird things are happening, that's all. Things that seem strangely coincidental. I don't for a minute believe that there are ghosts in the house. I don't believe in ghosts, period."

Squirrelly's brow rose.

"Does the name Leonard D'arava mean anything to you?" he asked after the long pause.

"Leonard who? Aw, fuck no, man. I don't know no Leonard and shit, if he's some john who told you I ripped him off, he's full'a fuckin' *shit*, man. I mean, I've ripped off johns a few times, sure, but only if they deserve it. Shit, man, you wouldn't believe some of the shit these sick creeps try to pull on a girl, like this one guy who wanted to fuck me with his little girl's Ken doll and then there was this fuckin' chump from Jersey—he wanted me to put gerbils up his ass and give him head while I'm wearing a Santa suit! So —"

"No, no, Squirrelly, it's nothing like that. Nobody's told me anything about you. I just wondered if you'd heard the name."

She scratched at a scab just under the lip of her top. "Naw, don't know no Leonard. Well, shit, one of Chopper's friends who rode with the D's was named Leonard, I think, but he got chainsawed by Mexicans for selling brown skag on some other dealer's turf. Couldn't be who you mean 'cos that happened a couple of years ago and it was down in fuckin' Florida, man. Chopper and the D's run dope on their Harleys from there to here all the time. But anyway, like you were saying, you don't believe in ghosts and that's cool, but maybe you will real soon 'cos, shit, the shit that went on in that house you're renting is some of the worst shit in the fuckin' world, man. Ask me, you're out'a your fuckin' mind to stay there. You there by yourself?"

"No, I'm with, well," he hesitated. "A girl, but she's my fath—"

"Fuck, man!" she laughed. "You got your girlfriend up in *that* horror house! It's like a fuckin' garbage can at a butcher shop! You got balls, man! That place is a fuckin' *graveyard*, man!"

"What do you mean?"

"It was a body-dump for the mob!" Squirrelly found the whole scene nervously hilarious. "Since way, way back. Vinch'd plant stoolies and snuff bodies there all the time. And those two scat chicks and hitters who got chopped up? They're buried there too, the pieces, I mean, plus a lot of the animals."

Melvin gripped the wheel harder, enthused. "Animals?"

"Oh, fuck, yeah. I told you yesterday, that place was a snuff-house, but they also made scats and wet-flicks, nek-flicks, and a whole motherfuckin' *shitload* of fuckin' animal movies, man. Dogs, goats, horses." She scratched her armpit. "Pigs."

Pigs...

That animal skull, he recalled. *Gwyneth said it might be from a pig.*

Squirrelly's bare, white, and very bony shoulders hunched up; she hugged herself as if chilled. "All this fuckin' creepy spook-talk is fuckin' creepin' me out, man. Let's not talk about that gore-house any more..." An errant hand came to her fat-less midriff. "Hey, you got any food? I'm fuckin' seein' things I'm so hungry."

"I'm sorry, I don't have anything in the truck, but I'll buy you a pizza. I'm going to that shopping center I picked you up at yesterday."

"Oh, that fuckin' rocks, man, 'cos that's where I'm heading too!" She put her hand back on his thigh, inched it right to the crotch, and squeezed. "You

want that blowjob now, for, like forty? I'll do your balls and everything, floss my teeth with your dick hair if you want, and you can come in my mouth and I'll even swallow. Some guys like me to play with it in my mouth or half-swallow and snort it out my nose. I can do that, too, no shit. Come in my face, come in my hair, come on my tits, come on my feet, whatever you want. Shit, man, there was this one guy used to pick me up in Utica who'd come in my ear! No shit!"

Though these variations on a theme didn't interest Melvin, the distractions collapsed on his focus. An offer for oral sex, something he'd never experienced in his life, he'd only dreamed about. And for only forty dollars! That would definitely refurbish some of his spoiled mood. But then a question itched, a technical ponder so to speak. Melvin wanted to lose his male virginity like about as bad as the Japanese wanted to lose the U.S. Marines on Iwo Jima, but...would oral sex facilitate that? Would that *count?* Or could he only truly be deprived of the humiliating tag of male virginity by intercourse?

"What about coitus?" he asked perkily.

"Huh?"

"Intercourse—you know?"

Her eyebrows shot up. "Oh, you mean you wanna *fuck?* Fuck yeah, man, you can fuck the shit out of me for...fifty dollars? Or maybe even...sixty!"

"Oh, let's do that!" Melvin said. He gave her a $100 bill.

She skimmed off her top in a flash, giddy. "You rock, man! Shit, I'll fuck your balls out your dick-hole! And you can take all the time you want. And since you gave me so much extra you can even ass-fuck me!"

Melvin squinted at the prospect. "Well, er, no, I think standard intercourse will be sufficient, but I'm grateful for the offer."

She laughed, hitching her shorts down. "You talk funny, man, but that's cool. Shit, pull off somewhere in this cornfield."

Melvin's penis felt more erect than it ever had in his life; it *burgeoned* in his pants.

The HUM-V lumbered off the shoulder and cut into a service road lined densely with man-tall rows of corn stalks. Shade swallowed them—it was perfect. *We're being cradled by the hands of the world!* Melvin thought. *Hidden, within the delicate cusp of nature, our natural desires summoning us together for this natural act!*

That's how Melvin chose to think of it, though they were actually just a john and a crack-whore about to fuck in a cornfield, a first-degree misdemeanor in most states.

Melvin's excitement infused him with a woozy ethereal euphoria. Squirrelly's shorts were on the floor now; she lay back smudged and nude on the Hummer's big burgundy-leather bench seat, opening her legs as nonchalantly as someone opening a newspaper. Truly, her skin was the color of cooked egg whites. One leg draped over the seat-back, flip-flop hanging off a skinny foot; her breasts all but disappeared in this position, the chewed-jerky nipples puckered up like garden slugs sprinkled with salt. And as for the nexus of her womanhood...

Several images might have occurred to Melvin: a woodchuck with an ax-mark in the middle, ground pork in a nest of steel wool, raw chicken livers squeezed through a hairy armpit, stacked corned beef. But to Melvin, this

catastrophic mess of a vagina was a visual siren-song, a beautiful, blooming orchid of love.

Squirrelly was so skinny that her pubic bone made a tent of the matt of hair, a steeple. Scarier was the suggestion of what existed beneath the hair, an explicit lippy groove of brown-pink meat. Anyone else would be assailed by the most horrendous question of all: How many dirty penises had ventured into this reproductive maw? Hundreds? Thousands? And what volume of semen had been emptied into it? Quarts? Gallons?

Yet such ungainly and indecorous notions did not occur to Melvin in the least. He was about to make love for the first time in his life.

Squirrelly's hands reached out, beckoning him. "Come on, baby! Stick it in and give it to me!"

I'm about to lose my virginity! Melvin thought in near-delirium.

He'd barely gotten his shorts down before he ejaculated prematurely. The orgasm was so prompt that he didn't even feel it.

"Oh, no!" he quailed.

Squirrelly leaned up, brushing some greasy tresses off her brow. "What? You *came?* Shit, man, you didn't even get near me! You didn't even make it out of your seat!"

Melvin slumped, disgraced, a useless loop of sperm laying like a garland in his pubic hair. "Damn it." What a ripoff! He could've cried.

Squirrelly had her scant clothing back on before Melvin could even get his shorts back up over his dead dick.

"Fuck, man, you come faster than any guy I've been with," Squirrelly calmly informed him. "Have you ever been laid?"

"Of course! Lots of times!"

She popped a brow. "Well, fuck, look, man, since you paid me so much, I'll give you a second chance later." She scratched her crotch again, and shimmied.

"Thanks."

Disappointment and embarrassment radiated off of Melvin's head like the heat from a fever as he got back on the road.

"Don't feel bad, man," Squirrelly tried to console. "There was this one guy used to pick me up in Binghamton—he couldn't come at all unless he was looking at a picture of Sinatra! No shit!"

Melvin didn't feel much better from the information. *There it is,* he thought with relief. The sign loomed: HERBSTER SHOPPING CENTER. *I need a bottle of Snapple bad.* The strip mall front lot was empty for its entire length but the end seemed to be crowded with over a dozen motorcycles. Then he noticed that the last storefront on the end was actually a tavern. CROSSROADS glowed the dull neon sign.

"Oh, fuck, man," Squirrelly said quickly. "Pull around the side and drop me off. I don't want Chopper to see me."

Chopper. Her psycho biker boyfriend. Alarm rang through Melvin's nervous system. "Chopper's *here?*"

"Yeah, he's at that little shit-hole bar with the rest of the D's. They all just got up here from St. Pete with a *big* score of smack, crack, and meth. But don't worry, he won't see you."

Jeez, what do I get myself into? Melvin pulled around the opposite end of the shopping center. *I pay a hundred bucks to NOT get laid, and now I'm*

dropping the girl off a few hundred feet away from her boyfriend who's probably killed more people than the Hillside Stranglers. It doesn't get any better than this.

"Look, I said I owe ya a fuck but I ain't got time now, man," Squirrelly apologized. "I'll get'cha next time, okay? I don't get in that bar soon, Chopper might get pissed and, like, cut off my fuckin' head or something!"

"Understandable," Melvin said.

"I like you!" Squirrelly chirped. She leaned over and gave him a big kiss, and even slipped him some tongue this time. When she gave his crotch a squeeze, Melvin pulled a spontaneous erection. "See ya!" She hopped out and scampered off.

Great, another boner and she's gone... He parked out front. A big OPEN sign glowed in the pizzeria's window but when Melvin pulled on the door, he found it locked. *Oh, man...* Inside, though, he saw an old man peek out at him from behind an open door. He hobbled up quickly and let him in.

"You want a pizza?"

Melvin's bad mood ignited some uncharacteristic sarcasm. *No, I want a basket of fruit and a copy of Gabriel Marquez'* One Hundred Years of Solitude. *Why else would I be walking into a pizza parlor?* "I'd like three large with pepperoni and extra cheese, to go. How come you had the door locked?"

"Those damn bikers, son," the old man complained. "They come up here five, six times a year with their drugs and loose women and carryin' on. Don't want 'em comin' in here. Come back in twenty minutes," and then the old man pushed Melvin back outside and locked the door.

I wonder if I can think of a place where I WOULDN'T want to live more than this. The OPEN sign blared in the window of the little grocery store. The door was locked. Momentarily, a fat woman lumbered out and quickly unlocked.

"Let me guess," Melvin posited. "The door's locked because of the motorcycle gang."

"Oh, gracious, yes," the woman yammered. She looked like Aunt Bea on *Andy Griffith.* "They terrorize this town every time they're here. Make it quick, young man."

Melvin grabbed a few bottles of Snapple out of the cooler and also bought bags of snacks. Aunt Bea all but shoved him out the door once he'd paid. Melvin put the goods in the truck, shaking his head. He stood around with his hands in his pocket, waiting, when an errant glance toward the bar showed him a lone automobile parked in the lot beyond the crowd of Harley-Davidsons.

It was a brand-new candy-apple-red Corvette.

That's not... It couldn't be.

Why would Gwyneth drive all the way down here? *It's just someone else with the same kind of car,* Melvin reasoned; nevertheless, he walked cautiously forward, edging along the store fronts. When he got to the bar, he peeked into the dark window and saw...

Gwyneth.

Buck-naked, she leaned back, sitting up on the edge of a pool table. A blissful grin contorted her face as her nipples, gorged by excitement, stuck out precisely as coat pegs. The rabble of unshaven, leather-jacketed bikers

stood round her, cackling, leering, rubbing their crotches. Sitting on a corner stool by herself was Squirrelly, a smirk of disapproval on her face. Somebody barked, "Hey, the bitch needs a tune-up!" The others hooted, clapping. Melvin could hear the rowdy revel from within, for the window stood opened an inch.

"Would somebody SHOOT ME UP!" Gwyneth squealed.

One of the fatter bikers stepped up, grinning through rotten teeth. Poised in his hand was a hypodermic needle.

Gwyneth sat upright, both hands squeezing her left breast. "Right in the tit, lover. See the vein there?"

"Sure do, Missy. I'll fix ya up," the biker assured.

He carefully inserted the needle into a modest vein just under the nipple, and dumped the plunger.

Gwyneth's head reeled back. "Aw, FUCK!" She fell back on the billiard table, shot her perfect legs up into the air, and spread them. "All aboard, boys!"

More hooting and hollering as a line of bikers formed between Gwyneth's legs.

"Just pretend I'm a car at the gas station!" she invited, "and FILL ME UP!"

Melvin wasn't sure how long he watched. One by one, the bikers stepped between Gwyneth's legs, humped for a while, then stepped away, hitching up their jeans.

Melvin gulped. *She's going to have sex with every man in the bar!* For a split-second it occurred to him that he should go in there and get her out,

save her from this avalanche of ruffian debasement.

To repeat: for a split-second.

Melvin hurried back to the Hummer.

My God, she really is out of control. Injecting heroin? Having sex with a dozen dirty bikers? *And she was asking for it!* he reminded himself in disbelief.

Melvin didn't have a clue what to do. In fact the only thing he knew was what he most assuredly WAS NOT going to do: go in and get her. *She's not my mother, she's my stepmother.*

Eventually, the old man in the pizza parlor, came outside, gave Melvin his pizzas, took the money, and locked the door back up. Melvin put the pizzas in the HUM-V, presumed he would simply leave but then...

I have to look again.

He snuck back to the window. His eyes couldn't be wider on the bizarre event unfolding before him.

What in the world...

The gang-bang was over, the sated bikers having retreated back to their spectator's half-circle, while Gwyneth remained the center of attention on the pool table.

She was on hands and knees now. A small twist of what appeared to be human excrement sat on the table's felt just below Gwyneth's face. Frowning, Squirrelly lay on the table too and had impossibly managed to insert her right foot into Gwyneth's rectum to just past the ankle. Then Gwyneth, grinning like a mischievous schoolgirl, lowered her head and began to eat the—

Melvin fled back to the Hummer. *This is really screwed up!* An understatement, but it was all his clogged mind could generate at the moment. A son's allegiance finally kicked in; Melvin knew he had no choice.

I have to tell my father.

He whipped out his cell phone and dialed.

"Melvin! Great to hear from you," Dad greeted him. "How's that article coming?"

"Uh, fine, Dad, but—"

"Oh, and how's my beautiful wife?"

"She's—"

"Put her on, will you?"

That would be a big negatory. "She's not...close by right now, Dad."

"Oh, well how are things going up at the house?"

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Melvin could not conceive a way to frame an honest answer so he just said, "Fine, Dad, but look, there's something I have to tell you." He ground his teeth. "It's about Gwyneth—"

"Ha, great set of tits, huh?"

"Yes—"

"I told you."

"Yeah, but listen, Dad. There's something you need to know about her, and I'd be...remiss in not telling you, so I need you to get ready for a shock."

Dad laughed over the line. "Son, son, I'm grateful for your concern, but relax. I know what you're going to say."

"No, Dad. You don't," Melvin guaranteed.

"Let me take a shot, then. Gwyneth got bored up at the house so she drove out to the nearest bar, hooked up with a guy, and made some whoopie. Am I right?"

Melvin gave that one some thought. *Well, she injected heroin into her breast, had sex with over a dozen bikers, and right now she's got a prostitute's foot up her ass and she's eating shit. Does that go a bit beyond the definition of "making whoopie?" I'd say so.* But before Melvin could actually respond, his father piped right back in:

"I should have told you in advance, but Gwyneth and I have what's called an ‘open' marriage. It's only practical in this day and age, son. We agreed that we'd be able to see other people on the side, to follow our natural instinct. If I want to fool around, I can, and if she wants to fool around, she can."

"She's fooling around bigtime right now, Dad," Melvin nearly choked.

"And that's perfectly fine with me. Hey, your old man gets some sideline nookie, too, you know. And it's all kosher, so don't you worry about it. Look, son, I'm at this conference and I've got to give a lecture right now, so I'll talk to you soon, okay? Have fun up there!"

click

Melvin put his phone away, dismayed. He didn't know *what* to think.

He jumped when someone tapped on the window. He expected to see a biker standing there but to his relief, it was Squirrelly, not looking happy.

"Shit, man, it's a fuckin' mad house in there. Some slutty rich chick with big tits just pulled a train on the whole room, man. You'd think a fuckin' stripper just walked into a rest home for old men the way those animals are carryin' on. Big tit bitch, I'd like to slap the shit out her, man."

"Oh," was all Melvin could say.

Her chipmunk face was creased with indignation. "Then you know what the sick fucks made me do? Had me take a fuckin' shit on the pool table and stick my foot up the bitch's ass, and then she ate my shit! No lie!"

"I, uh, oh," Melvin said.

She held her flip-flopped foot up, streaked brown. "Look at that, man. I got the bitch's *shit* on my foot!"

"Uh, sorry," Melvin said.

"Hey, can I have that pizza you said you'd get me?"

"Sure," Melvin said. He passed the box out the window. "Uh, have a good, uh, day," he finished, then pulled out of the lot and drove away.

(III)

Disillusioned, dejected, and aghast, Melvin drove back to the Vinchetti house and immediately took a nap. He awoke in fits, chased by sour dreams he instantly forgot—an instance he was very grateful for—and once he awoke with a numb, pulsing erection. Melvin, as usual, masturbated with a fury, contorting into laughable shapes, and the fuel for the necessary imagery was again provided by Gwyneth.

And violence.

Rap Daddy M. made the scene, laying more hefty pimp-hand across Gwyneth's angel face. Uh-huh, he *stepped* it *out.* "I *own* dis hood, bitch, and I own *you!*"

Then Melvin ejaculated on his stomach in grand style.

He slept again, struggling to push away less welcome images: Gwyneth's chicanery in the tavern. *I didn't even know it was possible for a human anus to admit a human foot,* he thought, but, lo, it was, the proof all too detailed in his memory. Then an even more demented thought: *I wonder what Squirrelly's...poop...tasted like...* A few minutes after he finally fell into a decent state of slumber, a cacophonic staccato-burst voice exploded through his mind: "—that's right, be there or be square and speaking of square, that last cut was ‘Square-Headed People,' off the brand-new solo album by Steppenwolf's lead throat, John—that's right!—John Kay, and up next—you heard it here first because the Sauce Boss knows what's best for you, that's right, I predicted this tune would make the charts and here it is, number twelve this week on the billboard, ‘Evil Woman,' by

Crrrrrrrroooooooooooow...," and then a discordant yet eerily melodic hard rock song ground between Melvin's ears, "Black cats lay atop your satin bed, you sure wish that you could see me dead. Evil woman don't play your games with me..."

Melvin snapped awake and jerked up, staring hard into space. He whipped his head back and forth as if there was some way to actually *look* for sound, in which case all he wound up seeing was...silence.

Man...

He got up, splashed water on his face and without much conscious thought found himself meandering in the back yard. In the back of the horse stable he discovered a storage room containing what appeared to be some very old photographic equipment: spotlights, empty film magazines, a reel-to-reel film editor. *Leonard D'arava made pornographic movies for the mob,* he knew, *and this must be some of his equipment.* Hair on the back of Melvin's neck stood up when he considered the exact nature of these films. What had Squirrelly said?

...that place was a snuff-house, but they also made scats and wet-flicks, nek-flicks, and a whole motherfuckin' shitload of fuckin' animal movies, man. Dogs, goats, horses... Pigs.

"It's a sick, sick world," he muttered to himself and left.

Next he found himself looking down into the hole Gwyneth had dug near the dog pens. The hole was considerably deep; it must have taken quite a bit of physical effort on Gwyneth's part. *That really is bizarre,* Melvin realized. *What would compel her to dig right there? What would compel her to dig at all?*

He picked up the shovel and fished around, then shuddered when he remembered still more of Squirrelly's words:

That place is a fuckin' graveyard, man! It was a body-dump for the mob!

Melvin dropped the shovel by the mound of earth, and took long strides back into the house. *Gwyneth found a pig skull in that hole. God knows what else is in it...*

Next, he puttered around in Gwyneth's work room and saw that she had indeed smashed most of the pig skull into dime-sized fragments with the hammer. In the corner of the table lay the plaque she'd been working on. Melvin's eyes narrowed as he bent to inspect it.

Hmmmm...

The shield-shaped cutting of mahogany had now been meticulously fitted with the bone fragments to conform to the shape of a cross. The pieces had been lain into some kind of resin which had hardened clear as glass, and around the cruciform configuration, much tinier bones—the bird bones she'd found when they'd arrived—had been just as meticulously arrayed about the center crux, to a fascinating effect that resembled a halo. Melvin stared harder, amazed. Something about the way she'd arranged and set the piece made the plaque seem multi-dimensional, the bone-white of the fragments hovered over the fudge-brown wood, and when he stepped back to re-view it from a distance, the effect was trebled.

Well... I'll be, he thought.

The piece was stunning, beautiful. In fact, Melvin had never seen anything like it. What he had seen of her other work seemed mediocre, or downright hackneyed. But this?

I hate to say it but I'm impressed, he admitted. It was an utterly unique piece of artwork and proof of exemplary craftsmanship. With talent like that, Gwyneth could indeed make money with such wares, not that she needed to now, not married to a millionaire.

Before he left the room, an impulse caused him to take another look at the plaque. The pieces of the mosaic seemed to focus a clarity that maximized the more one looked at it, an optical puzzle which shifted between blinks.

Was it jealousy that urged Melvin to smirk now? The quality of Gwyneth's talent proved that she was more than a frivolous ditz. She possessed considerable skills that Melvin had overlooked. *But I've got some skills too!* he insisted. *Maybe I don't write for a very good paper, but I AM a good journalist!*

He spent the next several hours in the converted pantry but those hours flew by. He started off with a bit of history, followed with incremental exposition, then cited witness accounts. *This is going great!* he thought a while later. All of a sudden, the spurious article he was being forced to manufacture was demonstrating some craft of his own. *Dirk will love it...*

Melvin's journalistic jubilation carried him through another hour, then another. Then—

He heard the front door barge open; Gwyneth stumbled in.

I guess the party's over, Melvin thought.

"Where *are* you—oh," she slurred, standing unevenly in the pantry doorway.

"Hi, Gwyneth," Melvin said. It was hard not to shake his head. "How was your day?"

"I—I...don't remember, I guess." She almost fell over when she rubbed her face. It was no surprise to Melvin that she looked an absolute mess, hair askew like a handful of hay, tight lavender top crooked and pocked with flinty smudges, and her jeans...

Oh, that's priceless! Melvin thought in a revel. "I hate to tell you this, Gwyneth, but those designer jeans you're wearing? You've got them on backwards."

"I do not," she droned, then stared down at herself for a good 30 seconds. "How did I..." She rubbed her face again.

"Where'd you go?" He stared up for the answer. "You look pretty messed up. Did you, by chance, maybe, go to a bar?"

Her fingers opened over her face, bloodshot eyes peeking through. "A...bar? I...don't know but I think maybe I did. Why don't I remember? I'm usually not forgetful." The words continued to pour out in a slow, dreadful slur. "Could I have dreamed it? I remember, earlier today, when you left to get lunch... I finished the plaque, and-and-and— I don't remember anything after that."

"Interesting," Melvin remarked. "I'm sure it'll come to you."

She brought her hand to her forehead and moaned, "And, God, I feel so woozy. I don't understand why."

Well, Melvin thought in delighted sarcasm, *I'm not a clinician, but do you think that the mainline of heroin in your TIT might have something to do with it?*

She stammered on, "And-and-and—*yuck!* I've got the *worst* taste in my mouth..."

Might that be—oh, I don't know but let me take a wild guess—the prostitute feces you were eating earlier?

She turned in the doorway, taking very small, calculated steps. "I have to go lie down."

"Good idea."

She clacked her teeth together at an obvious stab of pain when she took one step forward. Her back stiffened, and she brought a hand back to her buttocks. "Oh, God!"

"What's wrong, Gwyneth?"

"I— Oh! What is that?"

"What is what, Gwyneth?'

"It hurts so *much*..."

"What?"

"I—" She shook her head as if in some arcane resistence. "I can't tell you."

"Sure you can," Melvin insisted.

"It's private."

"Tell me."

"No! I don't even know..."

Melvin had to toy along. "Gwyneth, you're in obvious pain. Tell me what's wrong. Where does it hurt?"

Finally she sighed and simply gave up. "If you *must* know, Melvin, my *asshole* hurts *real bad* and I don't know why!"

I do, Melvin thought.

(IV)

Well past sundown, Melvin called it a day as far as the article went. He felt coolly satisfied with the work. He microwaved a few slices of pizza, then went to Gwyneth's bedroom to look in on her.

Jeez...

She lay atop the bed like a ledgejumper on a sidewalk, limbs oddly angled, neck crooked, hair in a tousled mop across her face. To his amusement he quickly recognized that she'd obviously passed out in the middle of an attempt to take her backwards jeans off; they'd been pulled halfway down, their butt at the front of her thighs. It was a mortician's ultimate masturbatory fantasy: the intact yet outrageously sexy suicide victim spraddled on the bed after ingesting a bottle of valium. Still warm, still soft, breasts full, and—well, not an expository term but none other would do for such a passage—her *pussy* still plump, perfect, and gorgeous and in some otherwordly way *begging* to be derricked by a hard cock one last time before the inevitable redeposition into a casket. Was Melvin The Mortician's penis up to the task?

Of course not. *I can't have sex with my father's wife while she's unconscious!* But it was a hearty thought nonetheless, and he took the vivid fantasy with him, to the bathroom, where he masturbated in grand style, ejaculating on the same pair of noon-blue Victoria's Secret panties he'd drained his vesicles on earlier.

THUNK!

Melvin turned with a start, pants still at his knees. *What was that?* Something solid had hit the floor. At first he thought Gwyneth might have fallen out of the bed but the sound...

Came from the living room, he realized, *not the bedroom.*

It was with more than a titter of fear that Melvin moved out of the bathroom and slowly peeked around into the living room.

Oh, jeez, that's all it is!

The cheap pastoral print hanging over the couch had fallen down. It didn't even have glass over it, so nothing had broken. He picked it right up ro re-hang it but then discerned the cause: the weight of the frame had pulled the nail out of the wall, and now the print, complete with "faux" brushstrokes, couldn't be put back up. *I'll have to get another nail...tomorrow,* he decided. He set the print face-out on the couch, but then caught himself staring at it: the pasture in the sweeping green valley. Then he glanced up at the wall and saw the hole in the sheetrock that the print had been covering.

He remembered feeling ill at ease last night when he'd first discovered it, right after the bizarre dream he'd had, the dreams populated by ghosts of what his imagination had turned into Leonard D'arava and his two skeletal cohorts. Next, he remembered...

That smell.

An unpleasant odor had drifted from the hole. He squinted. *Did I dream that or was it real?* His mind felt wiped out after working on the article most of the day. He couldn't recall so he leaned forward and sniffed the hole —

Ho-boy!

No, the dirty stink had not been dreamed, that was for sure. *Must be a dead animal in the wall. A mouse or something. And guess what? I don't care.*

But a second later something glimmered in the carpet. Melvin picked it up: the nail.

"Might as well rehang it now," he grumbled aloud. But he'd need a hammer.

Gwyneth has one in her workroom.

He loped to the room, switched on the light, but didn't see the hammer anywhere. *It was here earlier, on the table.* He felt sure. All that remained there now, though, was the completed plaque along with a scattering of unused bone fragments.

Hmmm.

Would she have taken it into the bedroom? There was no logical reason for her to have done so but...Gwyneth was probably significantly *less* than a well of logic right now with biker heroin in her blood.

He looked back in her bedroom and saw she wasn't there.

Where on earth could she have gone? She was out cold less than ten minutes ago...

"Gwyneth? Where did you go? I need the—"

BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!

When Melvin rushed to the living room, his jaw dropped.

Gwyneth, jeans still backwards and down past her butt, was—

BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!

—turning the small hole above the couch into a great big hole that was running toward the floor.

"What are you doing!" Melvin shrieked so loud his voice went hoarse.

She wielded the hammer with a wild precision, knocking out more divets of plaster.

Outraged, Melvin snatched the hammer away, threw it to the couch, then grabbed Gwyneth by the shoulders and shook her hard—one of the most aggressive acts of his life.

"Are you insane?" he bellowed into her face. The tiniest speck of pepperoni stuck to her cheek. "You just destroyed the living room wall!"

Gwyneth wobbled on her feet. She looked at Melvin as if trying to focus on an eye chart. "There's...evil in the wall," she droned.

"No, Gwyneth, there isn't evil in the wall! There's plaster in the wall, and you just knocked a whole lot of it out! Now I'm going to have to *fix* that! My boss's brother owns this house!"

"Where's the bucket from my dream? Pam and Tom own a football team." She blinked glassily. "Hey, that rhymes!"

"You're out of your mind!"

"The weather!" she blurted, then pointed at him like a gun. "The leather!"

"What!"

"Gee, that's a swell map..."

Melvin checked his temper for a moment. *Of course she's delirious and not making sense. She's on drugs.* "Stay right there!" he ordered. "I'm getting my cell phone to call Dad."

Melvin hadn't even made it back to the kitchen before—

BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!

—Gwyneth was at it again with the hammer. Melvin tackled her this time, wrestled her to the couch, and now his aggression took on another aspect quite rare in him: profanity. Melvin almost *never* cussed; in fact, it took quite a bit of active anxiety to cause him to do so. Cursing was uncivilized; it was the way rednecks spoke, and plebeians and other low-lifes. Bad language proved an affront to Melvin's intelligence and refinement.

Fuck!

Anyway, his even more rare spate of anger caused him to completely abandon this tenet of sophistication, and he yelled in her face: "What kind of a fuckin' moronic ditz are you? You ridiculous, preposterous ASSHOLE! Did you see what you did to that WALL?"

Gwyneth's eyes rolled up at the wall, and she giggled.

This is how mad Melvin was: at the moment, his legs were wrapped around Gwyneth's hips, her bare stomach and pubic hair pressed against him...and he wasn't the least bit aroused. *Women!* he thought. *Are they all this insane? Dad really picked himself a winner!*

"You're a fuck-head, Gwyneth! You're a silly floozy fruitcake with tits for brains!"

"Oh, bondage, up yours!" she giggled some more. "I'm a worrier in Woolworth's!"

"Get up!" he barked, disgusted. He hoisted her to her feet, pulled her pants up.

"The morrow will not change your shameful deed!" she said, sing-songy. "You'll be someone else's fertile seed!"

It was just more nonsense she was blabbering. Finally she added, in an African American dialect, but giggling, "It was me and Lou Rawls. They locked us up in that cage and didn't give us nothin' but milk bottles and soup!"

"Aw, Jesus, you're all fucked up on drugs!" He roughly guided her back toward her bedroom. "You're a disgrace, Gwyneth. You're a dick-brain!"

In the hall, her knees began to give out; Melvin had to carry her the rest of way, not an easy feat for a confirmed weakling. When she burped in his face, Melvin nearly wretched at the smell: *Poop-breath! Argg!* He found some satisfaction, then, in finally heaving her out of his arms onto the bed because in his mind was the fantasy: heaving her out of a very high window.

Moonlight lay across her. Her hands feebly felt her groin. "The...ass of my pants is over my pussy!"

Tit-head! he thought. "Go to sleep! You're in a lot of trouble!"

She lay completely limp now, purring. "I'm...too fucked up to take my clothes off!"

"Tell me about it."

She tried to pull her top off but gave up. "Take my clothes off...and you can fuck me."

Melvin stared at her in the dark.

The moonlight made her eyes look like eggs. Her voice droned upward, "I really want you to fuck me, Leonard."

It was a vertiginous shift in his vision that showed him *this* fantasy: dropping the blade of a fire-ax into the middle of her face.

Melvin didn't do that, of course, and it wasn't really even a fantasy. It was just something that—combined with the trauma and stress of the moment—occurred to him.

Melvin left the room, after telling her in a voice like crumbling rocks, "My name's not Leonard."

««—»»

The mess she'd made was horrendous. Chunks of sheetrock lay strewn everywhere, and when he took another long glance at the wall, he groaned. It reminded him of the Three Stooges episode, "Goofs on a Roof," where Larry had dropped a television knob into a hole in the wall and used a hammer to get it out.

The entire wall section would have to be replastered, sanded, and painted. *It's not my problem!* Melvin reasoned. *It's Dad's. That dizzy tramp is HIS wife.* It only seemed fair. *I'll have to hire a contractor and send Dad the bill. Dirk'll go nuts if he finds out about this.*

Gwyneth had knocked holes all the way down to the top of the couch. When Melvin looked into the lowest hole...he thought he saw something.

It didn't look like a dead mouse. It looked shiny.

He pushed the couch away to maneuver.

He put his hand into the hole and reached down. *Maybe...it's jewels!* came the greedy thought. *Or mob money! A secret stash!*

What he pulled out instead was a can of dog food. *Oh, come on!* It looked very old, its label so faded he almost couldn't read it. BIG CHUNK BEEF DINNER, it read. Giant brand. With a happy German Shepard on the front.

So much for mob money...

Melvin didn't even want to *try* to contemplate why there might be a can of dog food in the wall. He reached in and pulled out something else. *A sack?* he guessed. *A cloth bag?*

Not quite. It was a black T-shirt wrapped around something. Melvin opened it on the couch cushion, and several things fell out.

A half dozen tiny plastic bags of white powder, a cloudy syringe, and...

More cans.

But not dog food. The cans were flat. *Film cans,* he knew at once. Small, four inches wide each. Masking tape provided labels on which someone had scrawled: *Horsin' Around, Makin' Bacon, Dog Day Afternoon.* The bottom can read *Scat Comp - Wetshot edits (5-77)*

Melvin looked at the bizarre cans, revolted because he knew what they were...yet fascinated all the same. *These are some of the movies Leonard D'arava made for Paul Vinchetti's porn network.* He read the white block letters on the T-shirt: VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR.

He sat back on the couch, thinking. *Do I really want to see these movies? Of course not!* But he could if he wanted to. It was old, old format film—8 millimeter, or 16—which people had stopped using decades ago, but Melvin knew he could take these films to a processing lab and have them put on DVD. Or—

Wait a minute...

The most morbid curiosity carried him out the back door and into the warm, cricket-trilling night. *It probably doesn't even work anymore,* he told himself. Blocks of moonlight carpeted the stable floor, while the floor itself creaked with each step. A breath caught in his chest when he whirled, a certain someone had been standing outside looking in through the plank-wood half-door.

A tall, lanky figure inked into shadow.

But when Melvin looked outside, no one was there.

He found the bulky editing machine and lumbered back to the house. In only a few minutes he managed to set the machine up on the end table. The machine read SANKYO on the face. A tiny screen—9 by 6 inches—was mounted over a projection hood. And when he flicked the power switch—

Unbelievable! It still works after all these years...

The screen turned a luminous pale white. Melvin selected the film can that read *Scat Comp—Wetshot edits (5-77),* presuming by the date that this one most assuredly had been made by Leonard D'arava, and after some difficulty he managed to feed the plastic leader through the editor's tiny film gate.

Melvin turned the speed-knob to SLOW.

And watched.

The machine didn't flutter like a movie projector; instead, it seemed to *cruise* in near silence. From the size of the can, Melvin doubted that the movie could last more than a few minutes but as it turned out, he only watched for a few seconds, before he picked the editor up, yanked it out of the wall, and dropped it in the garbage can outside.

He did his best to shut down all thought. In fact, the only thought he could think was *Don't think, don't think, don't think*, over and over. He left the house, staggered down the drive, and walked for a long time, peering through a thousand-yard stare at the revolting impossibility he'd seen on the minuscule screen.

This: an emaciated woman on hands and knees dipping her face down to eat from a modest pile of human excrement on the floor. Up her ass to the ankle was the foot of another woman, an emaciated blonde.

The activity, filmed in 1977, replicated an identical activity Melvin had seen his father's wife partake in earlier today.

PART FOUR

(I)

It was the strangest dream that dragged him down into sleep. He felt as though he were lying in a coffin, and the coffin was being slowly lowered into the earth. He could hear dirt falling onto the lid, until he was covered up entirely, and then suddenly his mind was a camera lens.

A big car on the open road. A Cadillac, gray, late '60s. A man's voice but a voice that did not belong to Melvin talked like a voiceover in a movie.

Here's how I lost my true virginity. I chopped a woman in half at the waist and had sex with the bottom half.

Then: *It's interesting. Everything is providential...*

The Cadillac cruised on. Were there...a bunch of women in it?

Another voice, which sounded British, sang in a terra-schzoid warble: *Now all history is reduced to the syllables of our name. Nothing can ever be the same. Now the immortals are here...*

From the dream's vantage-point, the eye of Melvin's mind tried to look more closely into the car, and he did indeed spy several women packed inside. Five of them, it looked like, all around 17. Their eyes all looked sated by some blessed contentment. The girls' hair was disarrayed, and they dressed in the oddest garb: frilly white bonnets and severe black ankle dresses. Their hands all lay folded in their laps, and in the distant yet joyous expressions on their faces, they seemed to be waiting for something.

The man's voice again: *God said to go unto the earth and be fruitful and multiply. Well, that night, the devil said the same thing to me. It was a happy time.*

Melvin finally got a look at the driver. It wasn't a man, really. It was a monster.

Something like a time lapse seemed to pass, like a transition in a film. Jumpcuts underpinned by the slow, heavy thud of a human—or perhaps not so human—heart. The Cadillac's roof sweeping down tree-lined country roads. A crooked roadsign: LUNTVILLE, VA - 60 MILES. More intercuts threw up flashes before the viewer's eyes. Roads grew more narrow, the woods grew deeper. The big luxury car had truly arrived at the backwoods, far away from civilization. And the voice again, in Bergmanesque narration, *The monster... Me. I took care of my charges, as Adam took care of Eve after she bit the apple...* Where was Max von Sydow when you needed him?

The shadowed thing in moonlight, the abominable hulk—the *transposition*—an ink-black cutout shape. Two horns jutted from its head as leaves skittered past in a midnight breeze. The five girl-women he'd brought here from so far away lay sedate and content in the fire-lit cave the monster had selected as their home—home, that is, and maternity ward. Their austere garb shed now, the women lounged naked—their natural state. Their breasts lay heavy, vibrating with untapped milk, their young bellies bloated with life...

The monster kept the women warm, kept them safe, kept them fed with the fruits of the land. And though the monster was a very sexual creature, it refrained from intercourse with their tender loins so not to damage the precious nuggets of evil within. But the monster *did* receive plenteous oral sex from the women because...well...

Why not?

And then they were born, the narrator returned as more jumpcuts showed glimpses of the women's bellies growing, backed by a pretentious ticking sound and flashes of old photographs of Leonard D'arava. *My sons and daughters were born into the face of God's daylight, and they were beautiful babies.* A wolf howled, for no apparent reason. *Beautiful on the outside, unspeakable on the inside...*

The women, teary-eyed in joy, coddled the newborns, and the newborns suckled greedily. Later, the women left the cave and drifted out through the woods, to a spectacular bluff. They smiled serenely, their eyes closed and upturned to the moon, and they jumped naked off the cliff, one by one...

The Cadillac on the road again, then the Cadillac pulling away from a county hospital, leaving the chubby babies on the doorstep.

The dream-narrator, one last time. *My job was done. I drove far, far away until I came upon another plush and gorgeous woodland, and then I parked the car and got out and walked to the middle of the woods—*

The monster walked far and aimlessly through the densest thicket amid trees.

—and then I lay down and died.

The monster lay still, and his inhuman body decomposed. Eventually, the thicket grew over it, until it could no longer be seen. As if it had never existed.

«««—»»»

Melvin woke up frowning. *That was the dumbest dream I ever had in my life!* But then he retracted the thought. At least it wasn't a nightmare.

His travel clock read 4:12 a.m. *Damn...* He let more time pass, sitting upright in moon-tinged darkness. Eventually he left the room, garbed only in T-shirt and briefs. His stomach felt so empty it could have been attempting to digest itself. *Get something to eat*, he thought.

That would surely make him feel better.

Melvin never made it to the kitchen, his trek discontinued by the sight of Gwyneth, fully naked, sitting quite oddly on the living room couch. Her legs were spread to the absolute limits of her hip joints and she was leaning over so far her back was bowed; she was looking directly at her splayed

vagina. Two fingers of her left hand V'd at the top of the vulva, pulling upward, to completely bare her clitoris.

Two fingers of her right hand delicately manipulated a syringe. Melvin's inexplicable macro-vision returned, zooming to her crotch. He could see every pink, glistening detail—as if through the strongest magnifying glass—as the syringe was emptied through the needle directly into the clitoris.

"Aw, yeaaaaaaaaah..."

Gwyneth's clitoral bolus swelled momentarily, then reverted to normal size, the ever-tiniest drop of blood forming at the very tip.

She collapsed back against the couch, cross-eyed and drooling through the most indulgent grin. Very slowly, her head turned to Melvin.

"That's really good smack, Melvin..."

Then her stomach spontaneously emptied, a line of thin vomit exited quite liberally through her smiling lips.

Melvin staggered, half-convulsing, to the kitchen. *I don't think this is a dream. I think. This. Is real...*

No appetite remained, of course, when he reached the kitchen. But light bid safety so the first thing he did was flick the wall switch up.

Only to be left to stare in aghast silence.

Dirt covered the kitchen floor—dirt from the earth. Two skulls lay on their sides on the counter, and on the floor lay a headless skeleton and two more skeletons disconnected at the waist.

Melvin fled out the back door. He was nearly mindless now; hence he had no conscious idea where he might be going. Sounds of crickets and peepers

throbbed densely as electronic music. He nearly fell into the hole Gwyneth had dug earlier.

It was much larger now.

(II)

Melvin awoke on his back. Whatever he lay on felt hard, coarse, and when his eyes fluttered open he saw several sparrows sitting on a wooden sill, chirping happily. Warm, wonderful sunlight flowed down on him from an open space. After a few more moments of conjuring his cognizance, he realized that he'd fallen asleep out in the old horse stable.

Either I've gone totally insane, he reasoned, *or the Vinchetti house is very, very haunted.*

Whichever the case, however, Melvin resolved quite quickly that he and Gwyneth would now spend the shortest amount of time gathering their things, and then they would get in their vehicles, and then they would put as much fucking distance between their fucking selves and that fucking house as humanly possible.

He nodded. He rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he jogged back into the house, got dressed. He took to the task of sweeping the dirt out of the kitchen, throwing the skulls and skeleton parts back in the ground from whence they came, and refilling the hole.

Another hour he spent stowing their belongings, including Gwyneth's burdensome hobby debris, into their respective vehicles. Gwyneth herself

was no doubt still sleeping, and though Melvin knew precious little about the particular effects of heroin, he suspected she would continue sleeping for quite a while. He remembered reading Burroughs' *Junkie* in an American Lit class, and recalled that the characters spent undue segments of their lives "on the nod."

He frowned at the plethora of hammer-holes in the living room wall. There was no way he could fix that mess himself, and there was equally no way he was going to stay here while a contractor undertook the repairs. *I'll tell Dirk, and tell him to give me the bill, then I'll give the bill to Dad. Dad will pay. Dad's insane wife did the damage, so Dad will pay. Simple.*

In the course of Melvin's determinations, though, and his cleaning the house and refilling holes, it never came to mind that there was one thing he had not happened upon.

The cruciform plaque that Gwyneth had made.

When he went to wake Gwyneth up, she was not in her room.

"Oh, not again!"

The Corvette was still outside, however, so she definitely didn't go back to the biker tavern. *She's got to be on the property somewhere...*

He called out her name in throat-roughening bellows, and he searched the entire house again, and the entire property outside.

At the edge of the yard, then, he heard...

Something.

Voices.

Some sort of revel?

The voices seemed very distant, carrying up the north side of the hill. Melvin grimly looked down the vast slope of land and realized where Gwyneth must have strayed to.

The Epiphanite compound...

He began to stalk down the hill.

(III)

A few missing slats from the rotting fence provided his entrance. Melvin waded through high grass as he proceeded; the compound was a maze of old austere wooden buildings and crooked footpaths. The buildings all looked the same—drab, gray rectangles—save for one, whose steepled roof and bell tower indicated a church. Tall, arched windows had long-since lost their stained glass, and the massive front door hung off its hinges. Melvin wasn't sure...

Had it been the raucous voices that had led him here, or simply some undefined instinct?

He looked straight at the church. *She's in there,* he felt certain.

Three big Harley motorcycles were parked out front. It was through the broken windows that the voices channeled out.

"Ooo-eee!" a man's voice celebrated.

And another: "Un-fuckin'-believable! Didn't know a chick could *do* that to herself!"

Melvin crept up to the side of the church, rose on his tip-toes to peer through the broken window...

The church was gutted: no pews, no altar, no choir seats or organ, just dusty, wide-open space. An empty beer can bounced across the floor, echoing its clatter. Three very large, unkempt bikers in seedy leather jackets stood aside, leering down at Gwyneth...

"Uh-uh-uh!" she blurted. Naked, as always, she lay on her shoulders and neck as her back curled up and her legs poised above her in mid-air: a human U. If her back could've bent any farther, she would've been able to perform cunnilingus on herself, and perhaps that's what she'd been attempting in the first place. A euphoric exertion puffed her face. Her right fist was buried to the wrist in her vagina.

She slowly twisted the fist back and forth in the vault of flesh, obviously in the throes of a massive orgasm. Her feet flexed in the air, her legs quivered, and—

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—fuck..."

Eventually she flopped over and extracted her fist.

The three bikers applauded, guffawing. They all had tremendous beer bellies, straggly long hair and beards. The craziest-looking of the three was Chopper, the eyes of a rat sunk below his brow, black teeth, a headband with embroidered swastikas. The second wore an eyepatch, and the third had a hairy mole on his cheek the size and color of a shelled pecan (or if not a mole, a metastasis). They were all rubbing their crotches and slugging beer in between hoots and hollers. A very dejected Squirrelly sat in the

corner on an inverted pail. She wore the same dirty cutoffs and stained halter she always wore. She picked her nose, bored.

"Now it's time for some real fun," Gwyneth droned. She took a sip of her Hershey's and threw her hair back. She got on hands and knees, her gorgeous buttocks splayed, and she grinned at the men over her shoulder. "I've got a great idea! You guys quit rubbin' your dicks and get over here. It's time for some serious ass-fucking!"

"Chopper first," Chopper said, dropping his jeans and kneeing up. A quick hock in her butt-crack and he was rolling, herpetic penis slugging in and out of Gwyneth's rectum like a toilet plunger.

"Shoot me a big hot creamy one," Gwyneth insisted, her hand up between her legs to cradle Chopper's ungainly scrotum.

His face looked like a hairy, twisted pink balloon, black teeth crimping his lower lip. "Aw, yeah, you dirty bitch! We'se gonna make us a shit-baby!"

"Come! Come!" Gwyneth whined.

Chopper's hairy white ass clenched as his groin slammed forward. The moan of his release sounded like a dog being strangled. Meanwhile, Gwyneth reached back with both hands to keep his penis in her. "Don't pull out yet!" she pleaded. "Keep your cock in me when you're finished coming..."

"The fuck for?" Chopper asked, confused.

"Keep it in, keep it in... Now... Piss. Piss right up my ass..."

Eyepatch and Mole burst into more hoots.

"Shit, the bitch wants me to piss up her ass," Chopper chortled, "so I guess...I'll piss up her ass!"

He leaned back, gripping her hips. His eyes closed in deep concentration, then—

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

Gwyneth cooed, cheek pressed to the dirty floor as Chopper's bladder was thoroughly voided. When he was done, he pulled out and gave her a complimentary slap on the buttock. "Ain't no better way to get rid of a six-pack!"

"No, sir, there sure ain't!" Eyepatch affirmed.

"Who's next?" Gwyneth asked. "My ass needs to be FILLED UP!"

Mole eagerly followed suit, humping frenetically, then ejaculating, then urinating into Gwyneth's colon, and when he was done, Eyepatch took his turn.

Chopper chuckled and cracked another beer. "Think ya got enough hot piss up your ass *now*, baby?"

Mole: "Shit, 'tween the three of us, I'll bet we got a full case in her!"

Eyepatch: "A case? Shit, man! More like a motherfuckin' *keg!*"

Squirrelly's face was pinched up in the tightest frown. "Chopper, you're shittin' me! What'cho doin' wasting your time with that freaky bitch?"

Chopper hocked a loogie in her hair. "'Cos she's a hell of a lot more fun than you, ya skinny junkie. Now shut up 'less you want me to cut off your head and take a shit on it."

Squirrelly elected to keep quiet, maintaining her perch on the bucket.

"Look, fellas!" Eyepatch exclaimed. He pointed down. "Look what she's doin' now!"

A studied hush filled the church. All eyes fell wide on Gwyneth.

She remained on her knees, face in the floor, ass spread and jutting upward.

"What the *fuck*?" Mole uttered.

"I can't believe what I'm seein'," Chopper whispered.

Gwyneth, with some considerable dexterity now, inserted the end of the Hershey's Chocolate Syrup bottle into her anus...and *squeezed*...

She grinned, purring, as the syrup ran up her bowel. "Ummmmmmmmmmmm..."

Melvin stared in silent shock as some cruel fiber of his soul forced him to keep his face to that window. *This*, he thought, *cannot be real.*

But, lo, it was.

However, the most demented curiosity occurred to him now:

What's she going to do next?

The answer to that question was about to unfold...

Gwyneth was clearly not in her right mind now. How could she be? She'd just willingly admitted three stout ejaculations, at least a gallon of beer-piss, and 24 ounces of Hershey's Chocolate Syrup into her bowel. When she stood up, her lower abdomen protruded to the extent that anyone else would've believed her to be six months pregnant. Her cool, disaffected tone of voice escaped her now, replaced by a nearly psychotic shrill of enthusiasm. She strutted about the floor, breasts jutting, nipples hard as gumdrops from an aberration of sexual desire that could only be grounded in evil. Hands opened flat under the distended belly, she jiggled up and down, giggling in delight by the heavy sloshing sound.

"She's crazy!" Mole enthused.

"Look at her go!" added Eyepatch.

"Un-fuckin'-believable!" chuckled Chopper.

Now Gwyneth grinned through grit teeth, traversing her hips back and forth in the most macabre dance ever performed. "Look at me! Come on, baby, let's do the twist!"

More technical queries raced through Melvin's mind as he continued to stare. *What's she going to...do with all of it?* Indeed, everything that had gone *into* her would inevitably have to come *out.*

Melvin had a very sour feeling that something spectacular was about to happen...

Now Gwyneth jumped up and down as if on a pogo stick. The sloshing whipped up, louder, more vigorous. "I'm makin' Shake-A-Puddin'!" she squealed. She pogo'd around a bit longer, hopping a trail over to Squirrelly. Squirrelly could only stare upward, in shocked astonishment, until—

"Hey, bitch!"

—Gwyneth shoved her off the inverted bucket and flipped it over.

"Go, girl!" Chopper roared. "Go!"

Gwyneth squatted on the bucket, her tongue roving between her lips. "Thar she blows!"

It sounded like somebody dumping a bucket of dishwater into a sink. Gwyneth's lower abdomen visibly deflated as the revolting goulash in her bowel was expeditiously emptied.

"Oh, man!" Mole said. "Is this fucked up or what?"

"Damn sure the kinkiest bitch I ever seen!" Eyepatch remarked.

"You ain't seen *nothin'* yet, boys!" Gwyneth assured them and picked up the bucket with both hands.

Melvin's vantage point only permitted a single glimpse into the bucket: bubbles and froth like creek scum floating atop pale sand-colored liquid. A few squiggles of sperm floated as well.

Gwyneth's grin radiated, her eyes narrowed to devilish slits. She slowly brought the bucket to her lips...

Chopper squinted, his jaw dropped. "Man alive, that is one hardcore bitch..."

"What are you doing!" Squirrelly quailed.

Gwyneth shrugged. "What's it look like? I'm going to drink it. *All* of it." The brim came to her lips, but just as she would tip the bucket back...

"On second thought," Gwyneth said. She pointed fast to Squirrelly. "I think *you* should drink it!"

Squirrelly's eyes bugged. "Fuck YOU!" she protested. "I ain't drinkin' that shit!"

The church fell silent. Everyone was looking right at Squirrelly.

"Chopper! Tell that crazy bitch I ain't drinkin' that!"

Chopper came around Squirrelly and stepped behind her. He was chuckling. One fat arm girded her chest, while his other hand snapped open an angel-blade and held the tip against Squirrelly's back. "Tell ya what, Squirrelly. I'll give ya a choice. You can drink that bucket of slop—*all* of it—or I can kidney-stick ya, and me and the boys'll spend the rest of the day fuckin' your corpse. But like I said. It's your choice."

"Aw, man!" Squirrelly yelled.

Gwyneth passed the bucket to Squirrelly.

And Squirrelly drank.

All of it.

Melvin staggered back from the window, close to passing out. Like a sleepwalker, then, he trudged all the way back up the hill, back to the house.

(IV)

By now, Melvin's state of mind—his view of the world and the way he perceived the legitimacy of humankind's right to exist—had corroded to something unworthy of definition. Any time he tried to assess and reckon what he had witnessed at the church, he realized that there simply *was* no reckoning. *I came up here to write a silly entertainment piece for a low-circulation newspaper...and look what I get instead.*

He sat on the couch in silence, watched the room darken as the sun lowered toward the horizon.

Shake-A-Puddin', he thought.

"I just want to go home..."

If he went back down there and tried to get Gwyneth out, the bikers would kill him. Period. *Her mental illness isn't my problem,* he realized. *So why do I feel any responsibility to her?*

He whipped out his cell phone and called his father.

"Dad, I want to come home."

Dad seemed baffled over the line. "But...I thought you were staying a week or two, to write your piece."

"The piece does not exist to any degree of significance whatsoever, Dad. I just want to come home. Gwyneth isn't here, so I'm going to leave her. She's got the Corvette. She can come home whenever she wants. But I'm not going to wait for her."

"Son, you're not making sense. Where is she?"

"She's—" Melvin flapped his hand in the air. He thought, once more: *Shake-A-Puddin'*. "It's too long a story, Dad. Let me just put it this way. She's with some men."

"Oh, well that's no problem, Melvin," Dad assured him. "I told you the other day. We have an open marriage. She can fool around on the side all she wants, it doesn't bother me. Neither of us are the jealous type; we're both liberated, sensible adults. I want my wife to be fulfilled. I want her to have a good time."

"Dad," Melvin said with deliberation, "your wife is insane. You need to get the marriage annulled."

"That's ridiculous! Melvin, you're overreacting like you always do."

Melvin thought about that. For one second. *I just saw Gwyneth shit sperm, piss, and Hershey's Chocolate Syrup into a bucket. I am NOT overreacting by taking exception to that.* "I just want to come home, Dad."

"All right, fine. But you will not leave that house unless my wife comes with you."

"I have to, Dad."

"Then I will write you out of my will."

Melvin slumped.

"You have to be a man, Melvin. I entrusted you with my wife's well-being. A real man would never leave a woman out in the boondocks. A real man does not *abandon* a woman, even if the woman has some eccentricities. So, *be* a man. Life is full of its trials. Assume your responsibility to me. If you want to come home, then come home. *With* Gwyneth. Is that clear, son?"

Melvin sighed. "Yes, Dad. But she really is crazy."

Now Dad laughed. "Oh, son, we all go a little crazy some time. Gwyneth likes to cut loose on occasion."

Melvin thought one more time, *Shake-A-Puddin'*...

"And even if she was crazy, Melvin, I still wouldn't divorce her. You want to know why?"

Melvin shrugged noncommittaly. "Because you love her."

"No!" Dad cracked another laugh. "Because she's got the best set of tits I've ever seen in my life!"

Great, Melvin thought.

"So just calm down. I'm sure Gwyneth will be back shortly, and then you two can come home if you want. Oh, gotta run! Got another seminar now. But it was great talking to you, son."

"Sure, Dad..."

Dad hung up.

Melvin couldn't have felt more despondent. When he looked aside, he noticed the rumpled black T-shirt on the couch cushion. He'd found it in the wall, the film cans wrapped up in it. *Did Leonard D'arava wear that shirt*

all those decades ago? He looked at it again. VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR, it read. What in God's name was that?

The shirt dangled from his hand when he quickly went to his laptop and logged online. A simple Google search brought up hundreds of entries. He opened the first one:

"A seminal progressive rock band founded by English poet Peter Hammill in 1968. VDG created a strong cult-intellectual following through the 1970s with multiple critically-acclaimed albums such as H To HE and GODBLUFF. With quasi-classical overtones blended with treatments ranging from blues to metal, VDG went on to be hailed as unsung musical geniuses garnering praise from everyone from Johnny Rotten to Isaac Stern, and remain critically stamped as a rare rock combo that borrowed no influences from other sources, ultimately forging a sound and style unique to themselves. Compact disc re-issues of their work enjoy strong sales to this day, while their early vinyl sells for top dollar on the collector's market. VDG slowly dissolved in the late '70s."

A rock band, Melvin realized. Then he looked at the shirt again, quizzically. *Did Leonard D'arava wear this shirt when he ax-murdered all those people? In this very same house?*

A retching sound flowed in through the screen door. When he looked out front, he saw Squirrelly—quite understandably—vomiting in the yard.

It was a *lot* of vomit.

She stomped into the house, teary eyed, pouting. "Those fuckin' assholes, man."

"Hi, Squirrelly. Not feeling well, I see."

"Sorry I puked in your yard, man, but fuck! Chopper's got a fuckin' freakshow goin' on down there. If I told you what went on, you wouldn't fuckin' believe it in a million years."

Yes. I would.

"He's got some fuckin' crazy bitch down there, man. Blek! Some big tit bitch who's fuckin' sick in the head." She blinked, looked around. "So this is it, huh?"

"What?"

"The Vinchetti house. Can't believe I'm fuckin' standin' in it, ya know? Feels kinda weird. I'm in the same place my sister was."

"Spooky," Melvin recalled.

"Yeah, she was cool. I'm sure she's in the ground somewhere by now."

Maybe...closer than you think, Melvin considered.

"But, you know? It's not what I fuckin' thought. The place looks...normal."

Squirrelly, my dear. There's one thing I can assure you with incontestable certainty. This place is NOT normal.

"Hey, man, I haven't fuckin' washed in, like, two fuckin' weeks. Can I use your shower?"

"Sure," Melvin said. "Oh, and there's some pizza in the fridge if you want it."

"Thanks, but—fuck!" She stuck her tongue out in a gesture of disgust. "Lost my appetite earlier."

Understandable, Melvin thought.

She scampered off to the shower.

Melvin puttered around, not admitting to himself that if Gwyneth didn't come home tonight, he'd have to spend the night in the house alone. His moroseness followed him around, an invisible stalker. *What am I going to do? I just want to go home!*

He heard the shower hissing, then the faucet creaked off. A few minutes later, Squirrelly bounced back out to the living room, wet hair hanging in strings, smiling. "I'm done! Thanks!"

For someone who was just forced to drink a gallon of chocolate urine...she's in pretty good spirits.

"Oh, you turned the music off?"

"What...music?" Melvin asked.

"That music you were playin'. I could hear it when I was drying off. Never heard music like that—it was pretty cool. Vander something? I guess it was a radio station, huh? I could hear the DJ too."

Melvin didn't expend the energy in telling her that there was no radio in the house. Why bother?

"Hey, you want a blowjob for, like, twenty? Or maybe even forty!"

"No, not tonight, thank you."

"Cool. I ain't really in the fuckin' mood for it anyway."

I can imagine, Melvin thought.

"Well, I better get the fuck back down there. Shit, I hope that crazy bitch is gone." She squinted at herself, rubbing her hands together. "You know what I might do?"

"What's that?"

"I just might hit the road. I don't need Chopper and those psychos. I've got a mind to hitchhike back to the city, get off the fuckin' dope, and, fuck, get a job at 7-Eleven!"

That's sound advice. "I hope all your dreams come true, Squirrelly," Melvin said.

"Fuck yeah. Well, thanks for lettin' me use your shower, Leonard!" But then she paused, blinked. "I just called you *Leonard*, didn't I? Your name ain't Leonard, is it?"

"No. It's not. My name is Melvin," Melvin corrected.

She giggled. "My brain's all fucked up! See ya!"

She stepped out the front door, but Melvin came out behind her. "Hey, Squirrelly?"

"Yeah?"

"I just wanted to let you know that you were right."

She looked puzzled, scratching her head. "Right?"

"This house," he intoned. "It really is haunted."

Squirrelly gulped, then ran away into the night. "I fuckin' told you, man!"

Nothing remained to do except wait for Gwyneth to return. He decided to take a shower himself but when he went into the bathroom...

He stopped, staring.

In the steam on the mirror, someone had written: GIMME, GIMME, GIMME!

And below that, in writing that seemed different: LOOK IN ATTIC.

Melvin's brain ticked. *Squirrelly wrote it,* he immediately assumed. But then a separate voice seemed to drift into his head that said, *No, she didn't,*

Melvin.

Melvin hadn't even been aware of an attic. He walked in silence from room to room, looking to the ceiling in each closet, and it was in his own bedroom that he found it: a small frame set with a panel. He stood on a chair and pushed the panel up, slid it over. There was no light, but he reached out and patted his hand around. It landed on something—a handle?

Broom? Mop?

It felt thicker than that.

Melvin pulled out a fire-ax.

His teeth chattered. He nearly fell off the chair. He tossed the ax back farther into the attic, reclosed the panel, then ran to his bedroom, locked the door, and dove under the covers.

Like a child hiding from a boogeyman.

(V)

Melvin dreamed to the nearly inaudible whir of the Sankyo editor, and his scape of vision hitched as though, indeed, he was watching the editor's deathly pale screen as the film caught on snags over the sprocket.

The dream was a movie.

BLACK SCREEN

MALE VOICE (V.O.)

An image on a piece of film...is like a ghost.

FALL IN:

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Rapid FLUTTERING sound falls over all.

Protagonist MELVIN lying on a bed in a tacky but tidy bedroom. The only light comes from the moon through the window and a bleary yellow lamp out in the hall.

MALE VOICE (CONT. V.O.)
I'm a ghost.

CLOSE - Melvin's face. Eyes wide in dread, mouth open. Rapid TICKING O.S.

MELVIN
(to himself)
I'm paralyzed.

HOLD ON: Melvin's face. We hear soft, rapid FOOTSTEPS O.S.

MELVIN'S POV - BEDROOM DOOR

FEMALE #1 standing at slight angle in doorway. She is NAKED, deathly pale, emaciated. Ratty, shoulder-length brown hair. Eyes wide but sockets EMPTY. She is holding a black frying pan.

Her lips aren't moving but we HEAR:

FEMALE #1 (V.O.)
Leonard died when his brood was born unto the earth...

We hear a GUSHING sound O.S.

CUT TO:

CORNER OF ROOM

FEMALE NUMBER #2 sitting in corner. She is NAKED, emaciated. Ratty, shoulder-length blond hair. She is VOMITING a thin, black liquid.

She looks up with empty eye sockets. Her lips aren't moving but we HEAR:
FEMALE #2 (V.O.)
It's the pig bones...

URRPING sound (O.S.)

BACK TO:

DOORWAY - Female #2's head tilted forward. She is VOMITING slow gushes of SEMEN into the frying pan.

FEMALE #2 (V.O.)
Not just our sins. The sins of the whole world.

CLOSE - MELVIN'S FACE - He is aghast.

MALE VOICE (V.O.)
(corroded)
Sometimes there is a moment—a moment not of this world—that enables us to see things without actually *being* there. A *summoned* moment.

POV PULLS BACK from Melvin's face.

MALE VOICE (CONT. V.O.)
(corroded)
The most...irreducible...moment...

CUT TO:

FEMALE #1 in doorway, her face CLOSE but only HALF IN FRAME
CAMERA'S POV - MOVES OFF and

TRACKING SHOT - choppy, stop-start. POV begins to move past Female #1 into hallway. We hear muted SCREAMS O.S. and CHOPPING sounds. POV jerks around a corner into the

LIVING ROOM
Smoldering orange light. A stained, dilapidated couch. Crooked picture in frame of pastoral scene. Implements of drug-use on floor, a lit candle. Bloodstains and ax-marks in rotten carpet.

We see a WOMAN crawling on her hands out the front door. She has been cut in half at the waist. Entrails drag behind. POV TURNS to choppily leave the room, tracking over the woman's spread legs and pubis leaking influx of sperm, then moves into...

INDETERMINATE ROOMS
Strobic lighting shows a massacre in jumpcut-like flashes: a severed penis and scrotum nailed to the wall. A severed female head with a tongue jutting from an eyesocket. A severed male head with a penis

jutting from the mouth. A decapitated male body in a suit lay on a table, bones sticking out. A different dressed male body cut in half at the waist.

CAMERA'S POV swerves to a

WINDOW - We see a DOG PEN. Inside, three dogs are ravenously devouring a naked, decapitated FEMALE BODY. We hear SNARLING.
CAMERA PULLS BACK
POV drags backwards, retracing the tracking shot in reverse. We see glimpses of
1) A short slim man in a suit wearing a rubber Richard Nixon mask.

2) A naked woman with a curvaceous but mutilated body standing by the front door. She is scalped, earless, and noseless. Her breasts have been sawn off. Her pubis and shins waft black smoke, both having been thoroughly scorched. POV ZOOMS to her face and she SCREAMS, then POV RETREATS again to show

3) A tall, svelte black man in a tan leisure suit and a chocolate-brown silk shirt, the collar sticking up. A flaccid penis the size of a summer sausage hangs from his opened fly. He winks.

BLACK MAN

Hey there, Melvin! Wanna fuck my dick?

4) A young woman in a black ankle-dress, clunky black shoes, billowed sleeves with white cuffs. She stands beside the black man. She wears a white bonnet tied under the chin, honey-blond hair spilling out the sides. She's pregnant. Her palms are out-turned at her sides and they pour BLOOD.

5) A stocky man in his '50s dressed like a pilgrim. Stern, chiseled face and a black, brimmed hat. He looks like...Ernst Borgnine.

PILGRIM MAN
Find God, young man, or burn in hell...

6) A big, brawny man in a suit, large-jawed, short dark hair, talking on into big clunky car phone.
BRAWNY MAN
Well nothin' that I can see, boss, 'cos he ain't here and neither is the Deville, so I figure it's the kid who done the whole job and split.

7) A tall, naked dark-haired woman with the body of a runway model, but her arms are gone at the elbows. A tattoo of a perforation mark rings her neck which reads CUT HERE.

ARMLESS WOMAN

Hey, buddy, would you please tell my motherfuckin' sister Squirrelly to quit dope and go to church?

POV ACCELERATES BACKWARDS through hallway and back into bedroom, then HOLDS ON

MELVIN lying paralyzed on the bed. Wide-eyed, tears running down cheeks. His lower lip quivers. He appears to be looking up at someone we can't see.

MELVIN
I-I-I...know who you are!

MALE VOICE (V.O.)
Get it yet? It's the pig.

MELVIN
Whuh-what?

We hear the CHORTLING of a pig O.S.

MALE VOICE (V.O.)
It's metamorphosis, man.
(beat) It's transfiguration.

INTERCUT:

For a split second, Melvin has been replaced on the bed by a tall lanky young man with rowdy dark hair, fingers laced behind his head on the pillow. He's wearing jeans and a black T-shirt that reads VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR. He smiles into camera.

BACK TO:

Melvin lying paralyzed on the bed. He is SCREAMING.

CUT TO:

BLACK SCREEN

We still hear the FLUTTERING sound O.S. It persists for several beats, then STOPS, leaving SILENCE.

FALL OUT TO:

Melvin awoke screaming. His body, as if via no volition of his mind, jerked up and twisted off the bed. He fell to the floor with a *clunk!*

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!

His heart hammered in his chest so hard he feared it on the verge of rupture. He jumped to his feet, pressed himself back against the wall, eyes darting back and forth. He felt someone was in the room.

Just a dream, just another nightmare, he eventually concluded, and at once he was awash with relief.

"It's this house," he whispered to himself.

He yanked open the drapes and was even more relieved to see the sun rising. The awful night was over, and he would not spend another one in this house.

He unlocked the bedroom door, burst out into the hall. *Please, God! Let her be here!*

"Gwyneth!"

Sobbing from the other bedroom returned his call. When he looked in, he saw that his prayer had been answered.

Gwyneth—naked, of course—sat at the edge of her bed, stooped over with her face in her hands. She looked up at him in complete misery. "Melvin, there's something wrong with this house! It's making me have the most awful dreams, and it makes me think awful things, the worst...things..."

"Me too," Melvin said.

"I want to go home. Can we leave now?"

Melvin smiled. "I want to leave too. So get dressed, and let's get out of here."

Minutes later, they were both in their vehicles, driving away from the house. Gwyneth followed Melvin in the Corvette. A perfect day bloomed

before them. When Melvin was about to turn at the end of the drive, his eyes flicked to the rearview mirror.

What the...

Did he see a tall, gawky man and two wan women standing on the front porch of the Vinchetti house, waving to him? And was there a little white pig at their feet, snuffling around?

Of course not.

Two and a half hours later, Melvin and Gwyneth were back in Syracuse.

«««—»»»

It was the most relieving of sights: his father's grandiose house growing larger as they pulled up the long front drive. Melvin felt happily numb when he finally parked, got out of the Hummer, and took a deep breath.

Home, sweet home.

Gwyneth parked behind him and walked up, smoking a rank clove cigarette and sipping from...a bottle of Snapple.

"No Hershey's Syrup today?" Melvin inquired.

"I'm never drinking that shit again," she droned.

"Why? I thought it was your favorite."

"Something..." Her eyes drifted off at the thought. "I just don't like it anymore, I guess." She seemed uncomfortable, edgy. Oh, and she wore a pair of butt-clinging khaki shorts and a chartreuse lace cami top which essentially made her breasts appear spray-painted. The camel-toe at her

crotch was magnificently apparent. Magnificent calves flexed when she fidgeted in her Earth Shoes.

She grabbed Melvin's arm in a manner that seemed desperate. "I'm...beginning to remember things, Melvin."

"Not good," Melvin suggested.

"I'm not sure if they're dream-fragments I'm remembering...or things I really did."

Shake-A-Puddin'! Melvin thought.

"I'm just...sorry for any grief I may have put you through," she went on, her voice discreet. "I have a feeling I did."

"Don't worry about it," Melvin tried to set her at ease.

"And I also have a feeling I did some things that...well... If your father found out, he'd probably divorce me, and I have a feeling that...*you*...know what I mean, because I think you saw me do some of these things..."

Oh, I did, Melvin thought.

"So I'll make a deal with you, Melvin. If you agree not to tell your father what I did, I'll agree not to tell him that you jerked off in my panties. Twice."

Melvin blushed. "You got a deal."

She absently hitched up the sheer fabric of her top, which printed the texture of her nipples even more precisely through the material. Melvin cringed.

She brushed some hair off her brow. "What was with that house, Melvin?"

"It doesn't matter," he said. "All that matters is we're far away from there now, and we'll never have to go near the place ever again. So the best thing for us to do is pretend we were never there. The last couple of days...never happened."

"You're a sweetie," she whispered, smiled, and pecked him on the cheek. The gesture seemed harmless enough...but as she did so, she also pressed her hand to his crotch, and squeezed.

Melvin came in his pants.

"Be a darling and bring my stuff in, will you?"

"Sure," Melvin said, sighing.

"Thanks!" and then she turned and sauntered toward the big house.

What a woman...

But her voice called back to him as he was about to start unloading the cars. "Hey, Melvin? What on earth is Van Der Graaf Generator?"

Melvin stopped stock-still and turned. He looked back up at her in a creeping dread. "Why...do you ask?"

She frowned, breasts jutting. "It's on your shirt. Where'd you get that shirt? It looks...old."

Very slowly, Melvin's eyes dragged down the front of his shirt.

A faded black T-shirt with white block letters: VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR.

Melvin didn't know what to say back to her. "Oh, it's just an old shirt I pulled on at the last minute."

"Well..." Her nose scrunched up. "You should throw it out. And no offense, but it kind of stinks."

She walked back to the house.

Melvin didn't remember even putting the shirt on, and why would he put it on anyway? *It's been in the wall of the Vinchetti house for the last 30 years!* Repelled, he pulled the shirt off, stalked stoop-shouldered and bare-chested to the end of the driveway, and stuffed the shirt in the garbage.

There!

He pushed it all from his head: the house, Leonard, Shake-A-Puddin', everything. He knew that, as a writer, he'd have to cull away the psychological impact the place had had on him, and redefine it all in different terms.

For the article!

Melvin couldn't wait to finish the article.

He opened the back of the Hummer, grabbed his laptop case and the suitcase he'd brought. He didn't notice what had been left in the back: a long-handled fire-ax.

EPILOGUE

One week later...

Sheriff Funk stared stolidly, the stench shoving him back like a palpable force. *Sweet Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. It's happened again...*

Just a routine property check. Some of the TA's down at the strip mall had called in last week, like they always did. The bikers were back in town, and

they always seemed to raise a little hell during their brief stays. So Funk and his deputies had run them out of the bar one night, and that had been that. They'd followed them to the county line and watched them rumble off on their Harley's. No big deal.

Now, though?

This was a big deal.

He was discovering—quite the hard way—that a few of the bikers had stayed behind.

The three bikes parked outside the old church at the Epiphanite compound had been the giveaway. Funk checked the long-deserted site every month or so, just to check for squatters, and usually discovered nothing of import.

So much for routine.

The stench hovered like soup, backed by the nauseating sound of flies buzzing and maggots churning. It almost sounded like someone mashing grapes. *Probably a week old,* Funk estimated, judging the overall climate and condition. The three men had been dispatched with variety and vigor via an implement that was almost certainly an ax. One's groin had been cleaved to the sternum, presenting the illusion that his crotch existed heart-level. A hand had been chopped off and now stuck out of his agape mouth, while two severed penises replaced his eyeballs. The second one's head had been split with one blow, each half hanging aside on the shoulders, clots of maggots refilling the cranial vault. The heaviest of the three men had been stripped nude and axed in half at the waist. The top half had miraculously managed to hand-walk almost to the church entry like a member of the

congregation who didn't particularly like the day's sermon. Squiggles of innards followed him. The bottom half lay ass-up, fat hairy legs spread, and something very large had clearly frolicked in the rectal channel.

The fourth putrefactive corpse was female, rice-paper skin sagging on bones. One skinny leg had been chopped off mid-shin, whereupon the foot had been inserted entirely into the anus. The distressing vantage point gave Funk an unwelcome glimpse of the hairy vulva from which a large stain extended. *Semen?* the Sheriff wondered, revolted. Undoubtedly, though the volume of what had run out clearly could not have come from one man alone. *That's enough peter-snot for ten men,* Funk proposed. At first, the misfortuned women's head was not in evidence, until Sheriff Funk looked down into a metal bucket at the other end of the chancel.

Great God Almighty, he thought.

He'd have to get the coroner up here, and a removal team. Eventually the stench simply drove him back outside to the reviving air. A headache raged. Inside, though, he'd found a cache of narcotics and several thousand dollars in cash. The drugs, of course, would be turned into the state drug enforcement unit, and the cash...

Would be dutifully deposited into the county's private charity fund.

All at once, then, Sheriff Funk thought: *Wait a minute! That skinny journalist and the woman!*

They were staying at the Vinchetti house!

He'd meant to check on them earlier in the week, if only to afford him another look at that full-tilt living and breathing brick SHIT-HOUSE whom the writer claimed to be his stepmother. Funk sped his cruiser up the hill, up

the dirt drive, and churned to a halt before the porch, dust rising in a slow wake behind the car. They'd had a Hummer and a Vette parked out front when he'd first stopped by, but neither of the vehicles were here now. Funk thought the worst—that they, too, had been butchered, and their pricey vehicles stolen—but felt much more at ease when he entered the house. Nothing in the way of belongings remained, and the house was neat as a pin. The only curiosity was the front living room wall which had been pocked with holes.

No reason to suspect them of any connection to the murders at the church, Funk easily saw. He knew killers when he saw them, and this Paraday fella and his odd stepmother clearly weren't killers. And as for the damage to the wall...

Random vandalism, Funk felt sure. Paraday and the woman had obviously left the house earlier in the week, and some punks had come in here after the fact, trashed the wall, and that was that. There was no procedural reason to draw a connection between any of this and what had taken place at the compound.

But who had butchered the three bikers and the girl?

Rival drug dealers, Funk answered himself. *Pure and simple. Happens all the time.*

From his car radio, he reported the discovery of the bodies to the county coroner's office and the state police. Then he took a last walk through the house just to make sure he hadn't overlooked anything...

Everything looks in order...

He noticed something edging out under one of the beds. *What is that?* he wondered. *A picture in a frame?*

No. It was a plaque of some kind.

Sheriff Funk pulled it out and gave it a look. *Oh, that's right,* he recalled. *The writer said his stepmother was into arts and crafts. Religious mosaics...*

Well, here was a fine one. The strangest kind of tilework had been fashioned into a stunning cross mounted on the veneered plaque. It really was a beautiful piece of work.

The Sheriff wasn't into such things personally; he was more of a hunting and fishing kind of guy, and about the only thing he cared to have on his walls were New York Yankees pennants, his bowling trophies, and his prized shotguns.

But, you know, he told himself, still looking at the plaque, *this would make the perfect birthday present for my wife...*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edward Lee has had over thirty books published in the horror and suspense field, including *Flesh Gothic, Messenger* and *City Infernal*. He is a Bram Stoker award nominee, and his short stories have appeared in over a dozen mass-market anthologies, including *The Best American Mystery Stories of 2000,* Pocket's *Hot Blood* series, and the award-wining 999. Several of his novels have recently sold translation rights to Germany and Spain. His movie, *Header*, will be available on DVD in mid-2007. Meanwhile, *City Infernal*, *Messenger*, *Ghouls*, *The Bighead*, and *Family*

Tradition have been optioned for film. Upcoming mass-market novels include *House Infernal*, *Golemesque*, and *The Order of the Scarlet Nuns*, while he is currently at work on a limited-edition hardcore horror novel entitled *Minotauress*. Lee lives on Florida's St. Pete Beach. Visit him online at:

www.edwardleeonline.com

OceanofPDF.com